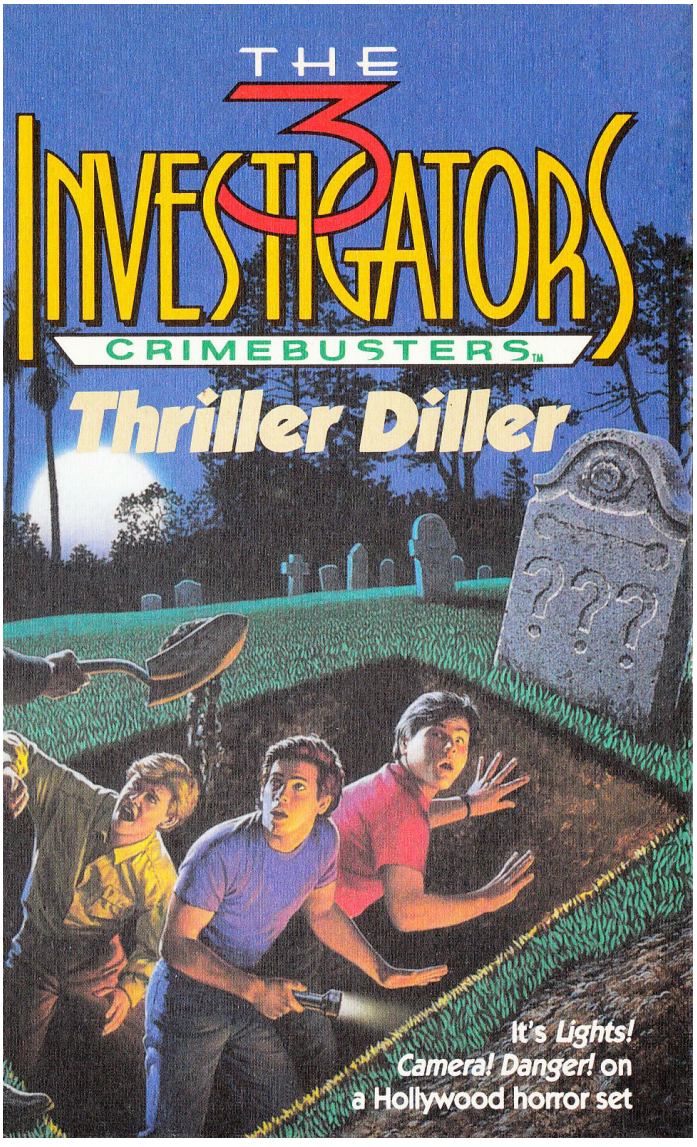

THE
3
INVESTIGATORS
CRIMEBUSTERS™
Thriller Diller
???
It's Lights! Camera! Danger! on a Hollywood horror set

The Three Investigators

Crimebusters #6—

Thriller Diller

Text By Megan Stine and
William H. Stine
Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur



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CONTENTS

1. Thrills and Chills 5
2. Hollywood Hi-Jinx 17
3. Pumping Blood 29
4. Halloween Horrors 43
5. The Suffocation: Rated Zzzzzz! 53
6. The Young and the Restless 65
7. Marble Jumps In 77
8. Crystal Unclear 85
9. Cat and Mouse 93
10. The Third Eye 101
11. Ransom in the Can 113
12. Inside Job 123
13. Jupe Cuts Up 133
14. No Loss! 143
15. The Vampire Returns 155
16. The Last Gasp 165

1. Thrills and Chills

PETE CRENSHAW PULLED HIS CAR TO THE SIDE OF the road. The small orange 1977 Vega bounced along the uneven shoulder and then stopped right across the street from a cemetery. Pete set the brake, checked his reddish-brown hair in the rear-view mirror, and slid smoothly out from behind the cramped wheel. Not a bad move for a 6-foot 1-inch, 190-pound jock, Pete thought with a grin.

Outside he quickly unlocked his trunk, reached in, and lifted out an arm. It was a long, hairy, heavy arm with smooth muscles like a body builder's. But at the end, instead of a hand, there was a paw. The paw flopped up and down with the motion of Pete's steps as he started across the street.

But suddenly Pete stopped and glanced at his watch. Nine o'clock. Uh—oh. He was supposed to meet Jupe an hour ago.

Maybe there was time for a quick phone call. But was there a phone somewhere? Yeah—a few hundred yards down the road in an old deserted gas station.

Pete hiked to the phone booth, still carrying the arm. Then he slipped a quarter into the slot and dialed a number. After two rings a familiar voice answered.

“Three Investigators, Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Jupe, it’s Pete. I’ve been trying to call you all morning.”

“I know,” Jupiter said.

I know. Those were Jupiter Jones’s two favorite words.

“How can you possibly know?” Pete asked. “You forgot to turn on the answering machine and I’ve been getting no answer all morning.”

“I didn’t forget. The answering machine is fried because I blew out all the fuses in the workshop. It’s definitely time to convert to circuit breakers,” Jupe answered. “And besides? I know because I can logically deduce what happened. You’re late, so something important must have come up.”

Pete could picture Jupe perfectly—sitting at an old metal office desk in the converted mobile home trailer that the Three Investigators used as their office. The trailer sat near the corner of Jupe’s uncle’s junkyard in Rocky Beach, California, just up the coast from Los Angeles. Jupe was probably leaning back in the swivel chair, working at his computer—or maybe reading a diet book.

“Okay, you’re right, as usual. Something did come up. But it’s not just important—it’s monumental. Guess where I am?” Pete asked. But he didn’t give Jupe a chance to answer, just in case somehow he could. “I’m at Dalton

Cemetery down near Huntington Beach, and I've got the special-effects arm my dad has been working on for the new Suffocation movie—*The Suffocation II*."

"Hmmm," Jupiter said.

"And I'm taking the arm to Jon Travis, the director, in about two minutes. And not only that, my dad thinks Travis may even give me a job. Is this cool or what?"

"It's cool, but be careful," Jupiter said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means a lot of strange things happened on the first Suffocation movie."

"Like what?" Pete asked.

But before Jupiter could answer, Pete's quarter dropped down into the telephone.

"Talk to you later," Jupiter said. "I know you don't have another quarter." Jupe hung up.

Okay. The guy's smart. I'll give you that, Pete told himself as he walked back to the cemetery. Otherwise he wouldn't be the leader of The Three Investigators. But how'd he know I didn't have any more change? And what did he mean, strange things happened on the first Suffocation film?

Pete crossed the road and walked down a grassy slope into the cemetery. When he was a kid, grave-yards used to freak him out. But not now, and not this one. This one was crawling

with life.

At the bottom of the first slope there was a level place cluttered with gravestones. Then the hill sloped down again, and the cemetery continued down, down to the bottom of a deep valley. The film crew was set up at the very bottom. Small groups of spectators lined the crests of the hills overlooking the action below.

As he passed through the crowd of onlookers, Pete saw two high school girls who looked as if they were about his age—seventeen. One of them was watching the film crew through binoculars. "What are they doing now?" the other girl asked.

"They're still digging a grave and just talking," answered the girl with the binoculars.

"Do you see him yet? Is Diller Rourke down there?" asked the other girl. "I'll croak if I don't see him. He has such totally awesome eyes."

"Calm down, Cassie. You're losing it."

Pete laughed to himself. Haven't they ever seen a movie being made? he wondered. Probably not. And certainly not a movie starring Diller Rourke, Hollywood's newest hunk superstar. Not everyone's dad was in the movie business and able to get his kid onto sets.

Pete walked down the next two hills into the shooting area, dodging around lighting equipment and crew members and open graves. *The Suffocation II* was going to be a really weird

movie, that was for sure. It was about a guy who accidentally gets buried alive and when he finally escapes from his coffin, he realizes he's turned into a zombie. Class A scream-and-bleed, Pete thought to himself.

At the very bottom of the valley he found thirty-eight-year-old Jon Travis, director of *The Suffocation II*. He was sitting on a canvas chair with his feet up on a huge tombstone, talking into a portable telephone. His black turtleneck and black pants matched his long, greased black hair. At 5 feet 8 inches, Travis was a good five inches shorter than Pete.

"Okay, angel. Where is Diller Rourke?" Jon Travis yelled into the phone. "Where is our wonder boy megastar, the one you promised me would be on time and know his lines every day?" He listened to the answer at the other end and curled his lips. "You're his agent! That's why I expect you to know. He's held up shooting for two hours! Do you want me to tear his heart out with my bare hands? Get him here!" With that, Travis threw the phone at a young woman with a long red ponytail who was standing nearby.

Travis is everything Dad said he would be, Pete thought to himself. Hot-headed, self-centered, and demanding. Maybe that's what made him such a good director of horror movies. Or maybe it was just because his movies were so bloody and gross. His last movie, Mondo Grosso, had

been a big hit.

"Margo, keep trying his beach house," Jon called to the girl with the red ponytail. Then the director noticed Pete. "What's that? A back-scratcher?"

Pete gave Jon the hairy arm. "I'm Pete Crenshaw. This is the arm my dad's been working on for you for the coffin scene. He said to tell you that when you burn the arm, the skin will peel in three layers. First a flesh layer, then a green layer with warts, and then a red layer with all the veins and arteries."

Jon looked at the arm and smiled for the first time. "It's sensational. It's perfect! Your father's the best special-effects man I know. He thinks like I do. Why just make something bleed when you can make it bleed and blister?" He handed the arm to a production assistant. "Hey, why aren't you in school?" he asked Pete.

"No school today. Special teachers' meeting," Pete explained.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Spare me the details. Listen, your dad's been saying you know cars. Is that true?"

Pete nodded.

"Okay. I dreamed up a new idea for a car scene a couple nights ago, but I need someone good to pull it off fast. Are you in the ballpark?"

Pete nodded. “I’ve got a friend, Ty Cassey,” Pete said. “Between the two of us, we can practically make a car talk,”

“I don’t want this car to talk,” Jon said. “This baby’s got to bleed—can you handle that?” Pete nodded again.

“It’s got to bleed from the windshield washers,” Jon went on. “If it looks like ketchup oozing—it’s wrong, you’re a wiener, and you blew it. It’s got to gush out in waves—as if someone sliced this artery.”

As he said it he jabbed a spot on Pete’s neck. A chill went down Pete’s spine.

“Your heart would keep pumping the blood out—ka-thonk, ka-thonk,” Jon said. “A lot at first, then not so much. It’s got to look that way and if you can’t do it, tell me now and get out of my sight.”

“What kind of car?” Pete asked calmly.

“A Jaguar XJ6, of course,” Jon said. “Ever go out and pay forty-five thousand dollars for a car?”

Pete tried to look cool. He didn’t want to admit that he’d never paid more than $750 for any car he’d owned.

“I can handle it,” Pete said.

“Okay, you’re gone,” Jon said. “We made a deal with Exclusive Cars in Hollywood. You just

tell them what you want and they'll give you the keys. Be back on Monday." He immediately turned back to Margo with the mobile phone.

"Diller Rourke's phone is still busy, Mr. Travis," she said.

Jon grabbed the phone out of her hands and threw it down. Then he turned to another one of his assistants. "Take my car, Kevin. You and Margo go get Diller. Malibu Court. Use force if necessary. No little punk star is going to take his phone off the hook and keep me waiting."

"Right away, Jon," said Kevin, adjusting his gold wire-rimmed glasses. "Malibu Court—is that on the south side of the beach highway or the north?"

Jon Travis glared at Kevin without saying a word. He looked like he was going to jump on him and bite his throat out.

"I know where it is," Pete said. "I live just down the Coast Highway from Malibu in Rocky Beach." Hey, for a chance to meet a cool star like Diller Rourke, I'd even buy one of those stupid maps to the stars' houses, he thought.

"Okay, mechanic," Travis said. "Maybe you can get my star into high gear." He quickly wrote the address on a piece of paper and told Pete, "Take these two out to Diller's beach house and bring him back. If you get lost, keep on going. I don't want to know from you." Travis motioned

Pete and the assistants away with a sweep of his hand.

As they got into Travis's red Mercedes 560 SEL, Pete breathed in the smell of the soft, rich leather. Margo and Kevin talked shop in the front seat, but Pete tuned the conversation out. He was having too much fun sinking deep into the leather back seat, becoming a part of it. He was like another accessory in the beautiful, powerful car —and the car had a lot of accessories. Three-line telephone, TV, videocassette player, 200-watt amp with Dolby sound, small refrigerator—the Mercedes was packed. Too bad they were only driving an hour or so to Malibu and not to Indiana.

When they reached the small beach area along the Pacific coast, Kevin slowed down.

"I could definitely live here," Margo said as they passed by the beach houses of the rich and famous.

"Which way now?" Kevin asked Pete. "Turn left," Pete said.

A mile or so later they pulled up to Diller Rourke's house. It was a single-story building of cedar wood and glass. In the front yard, among the typical California ice plants, there were a lot of highway signs, road markers, and directional signs, which were obviously stolen property.

Margo and Kevin got to the door first and rang

the bell. Pete hung back a little. Now that they were here, he felt weird about meeting a big star. What was he supposed to say to him anyway? Hi—you're a cool dude? How come you're making a horror movie when adventure thrillers are really your thing—is it just for the money? No way. Maybe they could talk about cars or something on the way back to the cemetery.

Kevin kept ringing the bell, but there was no answer. Then Margo pounded on the door. Neither method worked. She and Kevin looked at each other with concern.

Finally Kevin tried the doorknob and was surprised when the door opened easily. He hesitated before pushing it wide open. "Yo, Diller!" he called, leaning into the doorway. Still no answer.

As Kevin and Margo disappeared into the house, Pete came closer. What was going on? He heard one more "Yo, Diller!" from inside the house, and then it was quiet—too quiet. Pete's radar turned on automatically. Something was wrong. Quickly he walked through the door of Diller Rourke's house—and stopped cold.

Inside, Pete's eyes swept the living room. The house looked as though it had been turned upside down. All the furniture was kicked over, the tall standing lamps and the plants knocked down. A weird sculpture of four feet coming out of one leg lay on its side. Almost everything that could

be broken was smashed to bits and scattered from one end of the room to the other. It looked like there'd been a fight. It looked like a scene out of a weird movie. But it was real—too real.

Margo and Kevin were just standing in the middle of the room, not moving. Pete took one look at them and realized they didn't know what to do next. They were shocked and they were scared.

"What happened?" Margo finally asked.

"I think we'd better check out the other rooms," Pete said.

"Why?" asked Kevin.

"What are we looking for?" Margo asked, still in a daze.

Pete looked around the totally destroyed room again and his face grew deadly serious. "Try a body," he said.

2
Hollywood Hi-Jinx

"YOU REALLY MEAN IT ABOUT FINDING A BODY, OR are you trying to be funny?" Margo asked.

Pete didn't answer. All he knew was that something was wrong here. His heart was jumping on a trampoline. And he couldn't breathe. This place needed more air. He felt lightheaded.

"Let's look around," Pete said finally, shaking his head to clear it.

Glass crunched under Pete's high-tops. He could hardly step anywhere in the living room without stepping on broken glass. He walked through the house, being careful not to disturb the overturned chairs and lamps and other evidence of violence.

What happened here? Pete thought as he walked into Diller's bedroom. The phone was off the hook. That explained the busy signal.

"Diller's not here. Do you think the house was robbed?" Margo asked, coming up behind Pete. "I mean, maybe Diller walked in while the guy was still in the house."

"I don't know," Pete said. "A thief usually tosses all the drawers and closets. He doesn't

knock over furniture. Does it look to you like anything was stolen?"

Margo opened a couple of drawers in a tall chest. "Nothing's even been touched," she said. "How do you know so much about thieves?" Kevin asked Pete.

I'm a detective, Pete wanted to say. But he stopped himself. Does Jupe think I'm really a detective? Pete wondered. No, Pete's great for climbing in a window or knocking someone down. But that's about it.

"I think we should go," Margo said.

"Not yet, okay?" Pete said, walking back through the living room. Crunch, crunch.

Come on, Pete, he told himself. The broken glass. There's a clue here and you're missing it. Where did all the glass come from?

Just then Pete remembered something Jupe said often during his many lectures on finding clues: If you can't figure out what's broken, look at what's not broken.

It sounded crazy, but so did most things Jupiter Jones said—until they turned out to be right 98 percent of the time. So Pete checked out the kitchen first. He opened the cabinets and looked at all the glasses.

"Hey," Kevin said, grabbing Pete's shoulder, "if you're thinking about taking a souvenir, forget

it."

"I'm just trying to figure out where the broken glass came from," Pete said.

Kevin backed off with an apologetic look on his face. "Sorry, man. Tense scene."

All the glasses seemed to be there—none of them broken. Next Pete checked the windows. None broken. Forget the vases, too. There were no flowers or spilled water on the floor.

No clues. No matter how many times Pete walked through the house. Nothing made sense. If Jupe were here, Pete thought, he'd have five theories by now. But, hey—Jupe wasn't the only detective. And wouldn't Jupiter Jones be amazed if Pete Crenshaw solved this case by himself? Bob Andrews too. Though the third member of the Investigators was hardly around anymore, now that he'd gotten a part-time job with a rock music agent.

Driving back to the cemetery, Pete didn't say much. He just listened as Margo and Kevin discussed their theories of why Diller was gone. According to them, Diller left the house before it was destroyed, or he walked away from a fight, or he got drunk and tore up his house and then spent the night in a motel.

After a while Pete shut them out. If he was going to solve this case on his own, he'd have to come up with his own theories. But at the

moment Pete didn't have any.

"Hey, am I going the right way?" Kevin asked, looking at Pete in the rear-view mirror.

"That's the first question I can answer," Pete said with a laugh. "No. Take a right onto the highway and head south."

At the cemetery Pete, Kevin, and Margo found Jon Travis standing in a freshly dug grave, telling an actor how to shovel dirt on him.

Standing nearby was an older man who was bronzed and lean, probably from hours on the tennis court. He wore a shirt that emphasized his suntan and his silver hair even more.

"Back empty-handed? Where's Diller?" Jon Travis asked.

"Could we talk to you privately?" Pete asked, looking down into the grave at the director.

Travis scrambled out of the grave and walked away from the crowd with Pete, Kevin, and Margo. The tan, silver-haired man followed closely behind. Suddenly he wrapped an arm around Pete's shoulder.

"I'm Marty Morningbaum, the producer for *The Suffocation II*. You know, I sign the checks and make sure Travis doesn't spend it all in one place. So if you have something important to say, don't forget I want to hear it too." His voice sounded like everyone's favorite uncle.

“Diller wasn’t there,” Pete said.

Marty Morningbaum looked at Pete, concerned. Pete tried to move away but Marty had a Velcro-tight grip on his shoulder. Something was beeping in Pete’s ear. He realized it was Marty Morningbaum’s wrist watch alarm. “You’re trying to worry me, aren’t you,” Marty said. “Why? My hair is already gray. Who are you?”

“That’s Crenshaw’s kid,” Jon cut in.

“Diller’s house is a total wreck,” Margo said. “There must have been a fight or something.”

“A fight?” Jon laughed. “Diller doesn’t fight. He wouldn’t even squash a fly at a picnic—the little wimp. He’s only tough on film.”

“You went to the house and Diller was out,” Marty said. “He could be anywhere—shopping, windsurfing. Think logically. We’re making a horror movie—not living one.”

“That’s exactly right, Mr. Morningbaum,” Kevin added. “All we really know for sure is that Diller wasn’t there, he left his phone off the hook, and he hasn’t been home for a few hours.”

“He hasn’t been home all night,” Pete said. Everyone looked at him with surprise.

“How do you know?” Margo asked.

“We were in his bedroom. Didn’t you see his bed? It hadn’t been slept in,” Pete said.

"Very clever. You're smart like your dad, I'm sure," Marty Morningbaum said. "Well, these are very strange goings on."

Hey, Pete thought to himself, maybe I'm not such a bad detective—even without Jupe.

"Mr. Morningbaum, maybe I can help you find Diller," Pete offered. "My friends and I are detectives. We've solved a lot of mysteries…" He handed one of the Investigators' business cards to the producer.



"The Three Investigators?" the producer said, smiling. "No, no, no. That isn't necessary. Diller may be gone, but he's not missing until we wait twenty-four hours. That's what the police would say, and they're right."

"Twenty-four hours? Marty, you mean that little glitter-teeth jerk is going to cost us a whole shooting day?" Jon grumbled. "Hey! I've got a great idea. I'm going to shoot a scene where a zombie rips someone's heart out."

“It’s not in the script, Jon,” Marty said patiently.

“So what? Look—the light is perfect. The crew is in place. We’ve got gallons of blood, and gore is what people want to see,” Jon argued.

“It’s not in the script, so it’s not in the budget,” Marty argued back in a singsong voice.

“Marty, my contract says I’m the director, right? You can’t take away my artistic control.”

Before Marty could answer, Jon Travis took off in the direction of the waiting crew. As he left he turned around long enough to tell Pete, “Don’t forget about my bleeding car, Crenshaw! I want a green Jaguar—dark green.”

After Travis disappeared, Marty Morningbaum smiled and turned back to Pete, Kevin, and Margo. “Okay. Here’s some straight talk.” He spoke in a deep whisper. “We’re the only ones who know Diller Rourke wasn’t home. And we’ve got to keep it that way. This film doesn’t need bad publicity. No reporters, no photographers, no scandal. So don’t feed my ulcer. If we don’t hear from him tomorrow, then it’s serious and we’ll do whatever has to be done. Okay?”

“No problem here,” Margo said.

“I’m with you,” agreed Kevin.

“Okay,” Pete said reluctantly. He hated to pass

up the chance to work on a good mystery—especially on his own. And his instincts told him this was a good mystery.

"Deal," the producer said. He shook Pete's hand. "You've just made a deal with Marty Morningbaum. You ask anyone in Hollywood. It's worth gold."

Okay, so they weren't supposed to talk about Diller being gone. But that didn't mean Pete had to head back to Rocky Beach right away. He decided to hang around and listen to what people were talking about. Maybe someone had some gossip about Diller that would provide a useful clue.

Pete found a group of technical people taking their lunch break. He sat down off to the side, out of sight behind a tombstone.

"Looks like macho boy's a total no-show," said a crew member wearing coveralls. "Rumors are slithering that no one knows where he is. Looks like we trucked out here for nothing."

"Well, it figures things would go kablooey on this film," said another man who was chewing on a piece of red licorice.

"What's that supposed to mean, Ben?"

"Oh, that's right, you guys weren't on the first Suffocation film," said Ben, dangling the licorice out of the corner of his mouth.

"So?" his companions asked.

"Things happened," Ben said. "It wasn't just one of those scream-and-bleed movies. That film was jinxed."

"Like how?" asked the man in coveralls.

"The director who tried to film the buried-alive scene, suddenly lost his voice. I mean, completely. And that was Roger Carlin, a real director. Not a low-budget schlock artist like Travis. That's why Carlin wouldn't touch this sequel. And Corey Stevens, the star of *Suffocation*, got some kind of nervous disease right after the final shooting day. He was sick for a year. And I'll tell you something. I couldn't breathe right the whole time we were shooting. I could go on, boys."

"Hey, things happen on every film," said a young woman carpenter.

"Not like that film. It was jinxed—no two ways about it. And now this one's starting, too."

Pete had heard enough—enough to give him the creeps. He moved to a different row of graves and sat with his back against a tombstone. Beatles songs were coming from someone's cassette player somewhere across the graveyard.

Okay, Pete told himself. Here's what would happen if Jupe and Bob were here. First Bob would tell us what Beatles song that is and which album it's on. And then he'd explain why his

boss, Sax Sendler, always tells the bands that work for him to listen to the Beatles. And Jupe would be saying Pete, calm down, take deep breaths, and keep your eyes wide open. There's no such thing as a jinx.

But they're not here, Pete thought, and today I'm handling this case. Me!

Suddenly the sun went behind some clouds, leaving Pete in the shade. Then he realized it wasn't a cloud. It was something standing over him and blocking the sun.

"You are very troubled," said the figure. With the sun behind him the man seemed to have a halo surrounding his entire body. He was tall and in his forties. His blond hair was short on top and shoulder length in back. His clothing was all white and loose-fitting—more like pajamas than a shirt and pants. And he was wearing a number of belts, necklaces, and bracelets, each containing crystals of different colors.

"Sometimes it's best not to fight a wave but to let it wash over you." As the man spoke again he sat down facing Pete, cross-legged on the grass. He held out both of his hands to shake Pete's. "Marble Ackbourne-Smith," he said.

"Pete Crenshaw. Are you an actor?"

The man laughed, but it was a happy laugh, not a mean one. "My full-time occupation is to become myself. Not another character. And what

about you? How are you connected to this starmania?"

"I'm working on a c—" No, Pete thought, don't say "case." That was close. "I'm working on a car for Jon Travis."

Marble Ackbourne-Smith fingered a long, pointed, pinkish crystal that hung on a silver chain around his neck. "You are concerned about someone in this movie and you have come to a decision crossroads. Which way to go?" Marble was quiet for a moment.

Pete stared at Marble. That's amazing, Pete thought. He knows just how I feel.

"The answer is simple. Don't go anywhere," said Marble. "That is the fastest way of getting to your destination."

Pete was beginning to feel confused. Where did this guy get these ideas, anyway? From Chinese fortune cookies?

Marble Ackbourne-Smith slipped the silver necklace with its sparkling crystal off his neck. He tried to hand it to Pete.

"No, thanks," Pete said. "I'm not into jewelry."

"It's not jewelry," Marble said. "Take it. Talk to it and it will become tuned to your vibrations." Marble slipped the crystal off the chain and closed Pete's hand on it. He stood up to leave. "Listen to it. Listen to the crystal. When I did, it

told me there is only one person on this set you should worry about… and that person is you."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Pete said. "What's that supposed to mean? Is it some kind of a warning, or a threat, or what?"

Pete tried to sound extra tough so that Marble wouldn't see that he was starting to breathe hard. It was the same as in Diller's house—a feeling like being locked in a small closet where someone was sucking out all the fresh air faster than Pete could breathe it in. "What do I mean?" Marble asked. "I cannot mean anything. I can only say what my third eye sees."

For a moment Pete wondered if the guy was speaking English. "Look, I just asked a simple question. Am I in some kind of danger?"

"Ask the crystal," Marble said, walking away.

Pete opened his hand and looked at the pinkish stone. Sunlight glinted off it and suddenly it felt like it was burning Pete's hand. Pete jumped to his feet and ran for his car.

3
Pumping Blood

PETE HEADED BACK TOWARD HIS CAR IN A DAZE. SO much had happened—too much. And it was hard to sort it all out alone. Could he really handle a case on his own? He wasn't so sure right now.

As he left the cemetery Pete saw Jon Travis strangling an actress. He was showing her how he wanted her to struggle for breath and then finally die. It gave Pete a chill to see how intense Travis looked. Like he wasn't just acting. Like he was really capable of murder.

Pete checked his watch and decided it was too late to worry about Jon Travis's Jaguar today. Tomorrow—Saturday—would be car-shopping day. So he drove home and hid out in his bedroom, dodging all phone calls. He didn't want to talk to Jupe or Bob—not until he was ready to tell them what was going on. And he didn't even want to talk to his girlfriend, Kelly Madigan. Instead he stayed glued to the all-news radio station, waiting to hear if someone had leaked the story of Diller Rourke's disappearance. But there wasn't a word.

On Saturday morning Pete woke up dying to know if he still had a case. Had Diller shown up for work yet? Or was this really a mystery? He

had to find out.

He hopped into his Vega and drove fifty miles south to Dalton Cemetery. When he got there it was an instant replay of the day before. Travis and the cast and crew of *The Suffocation II* were all on the scene. But there was nothing to do. They were all waiting for Diller.

"Good morning, kid," Marty Morningbaum said as he suddenly came jogging around a large family plot of tall gravestones. He was wearing white shorts and a white tennis shirt. "How's your dad?"

"Fine," Pete said automatically. "Have you heard from Diller Rourke yet, Mr. Morningbaum?"

"Not yet," he replied, looking unhappy.

"Well, are you going to call the police?"

Marty jogged in place and turned off his watch alarm, which was beeping. "What can I do, kid? I've seen this before. It's just another young actor deciding to flex his muscles, keep everyone waiting, and take some time off. It's a nuisance, but it isn't a federal case."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to do what every man, woman, and zombie on this film is doing. I'm going to wait until Diller thinks it's time to make his entrance. And I want you to do the same. No amateur

investigating, kid. It's really not necessary."

Pete was silent for a moment, trying to decide whether this made sense. What would Jupe say? What about the fight in Diller's beach house? What about the broken glass? Put all that together with the weird stuff that went wrong on the first Suffocation picture and it sounded to Pete like a situation that needed investigating—now!

But before he could say anything, Marty Morningbaum's watch started beeping again. "Gotta go, kid," Marty said. "Catch you later."

Pete walked back to his car feeling a little confused. Was there a mystery to worry about or wasn't there? And why was he the only person in the world who thought that Diller's disappearance was suspicious? Well, Marty Morningbaum probably knew actors better than he did, Pete decided. Diller would probably show up on his own. In the meantime Pete was going to go out and buy a Jaguar! That part was too good to be true.

Quickly Pete drove down the road to the phone booth and called Jupe's cousin, Ty Cassey. Ty was a newcomer to Rocky Beach. And he was something different to everyone who knew him. To Pete, Ty was a guy who could make things work—especially cars. To Bob, Ty was a question mark. Bob said he never knew when he could trust Ty.

But to Jupe, Ty was a complete surprise. One day he fell out of the sky and landed in Rocky Beach—boom! Suddenly Jupe had a long-lost, twenty-seven-year-old cousin from Long Island, New York, whom he had never even heard of. Now that Ty was in California, he spent half his time hanging around the junkyard, showing Pete how to fine-tune cars. The other half of the time he just plain hung around. No one knew where.

Ty answered the phone in his garage apartment on the seventh ring. Sometimes he didn't answer until the twelfth. The night before he hadn't answered at all. "S'up?" Ty asked.

"Ty, it's Pete. What do you say we go pick up a Jaguar today?"

"I don't know, Pete," Ty said, slurping his coffee in Pete's ear. "Their locks are easy but they're hard to hot-wire."

"Hey, I didn't mean steal one. I meant buy one."

Ty laughed. "Buy a Jag? Yeah, I could make time for that."

Before the morning was up, Pete and Ty had walked into the showroom of Exclusive Cars, Inc., of Hollywood, better known as Expensive Cars of Hollywood.

The name Marty Morningbaum opened a lot of doors in Hollywood. Two of those doors were on a dark green Jaguar XJ6, which Pete and Ty

drove off the lot an hour later.

Once they were out of the car dealer's lot, they drove around Rocky Beach for hours. To break in the car, they said… and, of course, to make sure they were seen. And it gave Pete a chance to talk to someone about Diller Rourke, the broken glass, the crystal, and the strange warning Marble Ackbourne-Smith had given Pete.

"Why are you telling me and not your two buddies?" Ty asked.

"Because I want to handle things on my own for once, that's why," Pete said.

Ty nodded and smiled. "Go for it."

Eventually they drove to Pete's grease pit. It was in Titus Jones's junkyard, next to the trailer where The Three Investigators made their headquarters.

"We've got a day and a half to get this car into shape," Pete said, propping open the hood.

"It shouldn't be hard," Ty said, tapping the windshield-washer fluid tank with a screwdriver. "Let's get this baby out of here and put in a bigger tank." They did that and added a small air pump to increase the pressure. Then, late in the afternoon Pete ran home and borrowed some fake blood from his father for a test.

"Try it," Ty said to Pete, who was behind the wheel.

Pete hit the washer button and red blood squirted from the washer nozzles—but it sprayed in a tall arc that missed the windshield and landed on the roof of the car.

"Oh, brother," Pete said, "Jon Travis would tear our hearts out if he saw this mess." Suddenly Pete felt like he was suffocating again, like something was pressing down on his chest. He grabbed the steering wheel with both hands.

"What's wrong with you?" Ty asked. "I don't know," Pete said, climbing out of the car to catch his breath. But secretly he did know. It was the jinx—the *Suffocation* jinx. Maybe that crystal had something to do with it. He reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out the pink stone. It felt hot in his hands again.

"What's that?" asked Ty.

"It's a crystal, undoubtedly rose quartz or pink tourmaline, highly polished. Because it has a point at only one end, it is called a single-terminated Only one person could have said that. Pete looked around. There stood Jupiter Jones. Jupe, with rumpled black hair and a red T-shirt that said **Love Toy, Some Assembly Required**. He was the shortest of the Three Investigators and the chunkiest. He was always on a diet and had recently taken up doing stretching exercises. His arms crossed, he stood next to Bob Andrews, taking in the whole scene. By the time he was finished looking around, Jupe would have a

million questions and at least that many answers.

"The real question is not what is that, but why does Pete have it?" Jupiter said.

"Uh, someone gave it to me at, uh, the movie location," Pete said.

"It's a gift for Kelly, I'll bet," Bob said. He was wearing a button-down oxford shirt, chinos, and moccasins with no socks. Once the shy records keeper of The Three Investigators, Bob was now one of the most popular guys at school. Tall, blond, and good-looking, especially since he traded in his glasses for a pair of contacts, Bob was also the team's expert on girls.

"Yeah, Kelly," Pete said, remembering his girlfriend. He had purposefully "forgotten" to call her last night. And now he really had forgotten to call her this morning and afternoon. Knowing Kelly, Pete was in trouble up to his neck.

"Don't stand so close to the Jag, Bob," said Ty. "You're drooling on the chrome."

"I may go out and shoot my VW," Bob said. "Where'd you guys get this beautiful machine?"

"It's not ours. It belongs to Jon Travis, the horror movie director," Pete said.

"Too bad," Bob said, grinning at Pete. "Anyway, we're on our way down to the Ice Creamery to see who's hanging out. You guys

want to come?"

"Can't," Pete said. But before Jupe and Bob left, he said, "Hey, Jupe. You know about actors. Do they sometimes just sort of not show up for work?"

"Sometimes?" Jupe laughed. "Frequently. And the bigger the star, the longer you wait."

"Can you think of something that's glass in a house that's not a window or a drinking glass or a mirror or a vase?"

Jupiter raised one eyebrow. Pete knew he wasn't thinking about Pete's questions. He was trying to figure out why Pete was asking it. "What's going on?" Jupe asked.

"Nothing," Pete said, giving Ty a quick look. "It's not important. I'll tell you later."

When Jupe and Bob were gone, the two mechanics returned to wrestling with the car. But a few minutes later another distraction arrived. It was Pete's girlfriend, Kelly Madigan, a pretty brown- haired girl in blue jeans and a large-size man's dress shirt. She shook hands with Pete. "Hello. I'm Kelly Madigan. It's nice to meet you."

"What's the joke, babe?" asked Pete.

"Well," said Kelly, "since I haven't seen you or heard from you or received a letter, a note, or even a post card from you in two days, I thought

you might have forgotten who I am."

Pete shook his head. "No, I recognized you the minute you drove up."

"Very funny, but you're missing the point," Kelly said. "I just saw Bob and Jupe on their way to the Ice Creamery. Why don't we go get a double malted? Big glass—two straws—lots of heavy eye contact."

"It sounds good, but I'm really busy, babe."

"Pete, there are probably hundreds of thousands of guys in this town who would like to go out with me," Kelly said. She stood with her hands on her hips and her head cocked to one side. Pete loved the way her hair fell across her face when she did that.

"Then why don't you go out with one of them?" Pete didn't know whether to get mad at Kelly or give in.

"Because I happen to be nuts about you, you walking lug wrench," Kelly said. "Hey, nice car." Her green eyes sparkled like the waxed finish of the Jaguar. "Can I take it for a spin?"

"We're working on it for a movie," Pete said.

"How about tomorrow morning?" Kelly asked.

"Well, I'm sort of working on a case," Pete said.

Kelly's impatience was turning to anger. "Don't kid me. When you're working on a case,

it takes a crowbar to get you away from Jupe and Bob."

"I'm working on a case by myself. Is that so totally off the wall?"

"Is there anything in your life that isn't more important than I am?" Kelly snapped, getting back into her own car and slamming the driver's door. "Give me a call sometime. Maybe I'll be home."

Then she roared out of the junkyard.

Pete was frozen, but Ty started working again. "What am I supposed to do?" Pete said. "She's totally unreal. Come on, Ty. You're twenty-seven. You ought to know how to handle stuff by now."

"Yeah, well, I can translate her message," Ty said. "She said, 'Call me tomorrow, or else.' "

Pete rubbed his hands on his jeans. He could feel the crystal in his right pocket. Suddenly he thought about Diller again and got that suffocating feeling.

"Let's finish this car fast," Pete said. "I've got to get back to the movie and start poking around."

They stayed up most of the night and by eight the next morning the car was ready. But it was Sunday, the film crew's day off. Pete tried calling Kelly all day, but she wasn't home. So he helped his dad with a new special effect and had to wait

until after school on Monday to take the blood-gushing Jaguar to Jon Travis.

At the Hollywood movie studio where Travis was shooting, the guard at the gate let Pete drive right on through. All Pete had to do was squirt the bloody windshield washers once.

Pete found Travis inspecting sets being built on sound stage seven and digging a splinter out of his hand with a paper clip. As usual he wore black.

He's going to love the car when he sees it, Pete thought. But Travis wasn't paying attention. "Mr. Travis," Pete began, "about your car—"

"Yeah, great," Jon Travis said with no enthusiasm at! all. "Listen, I've got a meeting with Marty. Come on.'

Pete followed along, just one of several people who were trying to get ten seconds of Jon Travis's attention. They walked like a unit, glued together, across the studio lot to a two-story stucco office building. And then they walked into Marty Morningbaum's office, a large room filled with movie posters and photos of famous movie stars. The meeting had already started.

Marty was sitting on the edge of his huge walnut desk at one side of the room. Five people Pete didn't recognize, probably writers, and the different specialists—the director of photography, stunt coordinator, costume designer, and

makeup artist—were there, too. They were scattered about on the low, overstuffed chairs and sofas that formed a semicircle around Morningbaum.

"Come in. Sit down. Good afternoon, kid. Hello, Jon," Marty said. His voice sounded tired.

Pete sat down in a low leather chair next to Jon Travis.

"I'll catch you guys up—but I haven't said anything we don't all know," Marty said. "It's time to face the fact that for whatever reason Diller is doing this, he may be gone for a while. So I am recommending we move back onto the lot for the castle sequences."

"It'll take my guys three days to finish the sets," said a woman with stiff black hair.

Pete slumped in his chair. Forget the car, he thought. Now Travis wouldn't use the Jaguar for weeks.

"We're virtually closed down anyway waiting for him to show," Jon Travis said angrily.

As Travis spoke, Marty Morningbaum's watch beeped. A minute later an executive assistant brought in the afternoon mail. One piece, marked personal hadn't been opened. Marty opened it idly while he listened to people talk. Suddenly in the middle off discussion of burning flesh, Marty's face turned pale "Oh, no," he moaned.

“What’s wrong?” Jon Travis said. “Got a weak stomach, Marty? Can’t take the blood and gore?”

“No,” Morningbaum said. “It’s Diller. He’s been kidnapped!”

4
Halloween Horrors

THE RANSOM NOTE CRACKLED IN MARTY MORNINGBAUM'S hand, the only sound in the room. Finally he laid it on his desk and nervously began to flatten it out. Everyone was speechless.

"What does the note say, Marty?" someone finally asked.

"It's a ransom note," Marty said numbly. "It says they want a lot of money or they'll kill the poor kid."

"How much money?" Jon Travis said.

"They don't say," Marty said. "See for yourself." He stood up and passed the note to a writer seated nearby. The note circulated around the room, but when it got to Jon Travis, he handed it back to Morningbaum instead of showing it to Pete. Then Morningbaum put it in a drawer in his desk.

Thanks a lot, Travis! Pete thought. I've got to get a look at that note! But the reality of the whole thing suddenly hit Pete in the stomach like a shovelful of wet earth. Diller was kidnapped. And Pete had unconsciously known it—or at least suspected—from the minute he walked into Diller's beach house.

Morningbaum picked up the envelope the ransom note had come in and pulled something else out.

"Oh, no!" he gasped. "There's a Polaroid." He dropped the photo on his desk.

People jumped out of their chairs and rushed to the desk to see the picture. But Pete only got a glimpse before Morningbaum put the Polaroid in the drawer with the ransom note.

Finally the woman with the stiff black hair reached for the telephone. "We've got to call the police," she said.

But Marty clamped his hand down on the phone fast. "No police. They'll kill Diller if I call the police. Do you think these animals are kidding around?"

No, they weren't kidding around. Pete was certain of that. And if they were smart, they'd move quickly and wrap this up fast while people were still feeling shocked and powerless.

"Mr. Morningbaum?" Pete spoke up. "Is there anything my friends and I can do? We are pretty good at this kind of thing—"

"Absolutely not!" Marty said. "Didn't you hear me say no police? No detectives, either! I mean it!"

"You know what this means, don't you, Marty," said Jon Travis.

"Yes. I've got to come up with a bundle of money to pay the ransom," Marty said.

"Yeah, yeah, that too," Travis said quickly. "But I'm talking about the film. We've got to shut down totally until this is over. And I'm not gonna be the one to tell the crew the bad news. Bad news is the producer's job."

Marty turned his tired eyes on Travis, and finally nodded. "You're right, Jon. It's my job to tell them. Let's go to the set."

Great idea, thought Pete, eyeing Marty's desk again.

Marty left first, followed by the writers and the people who followed Jon Travis around. Pete went last, staying way behind them. When they were all out, he quickly stepped back into the office and closed the door. He rushed over and grabbed the ransom note from Marty's desk drawer.

The note was made from pasted-down words and letters cut out of a newspaper. It read: "We have Diller Rourke. It will cost you a lot of money to get him back. If you contact the police, you'll never see him alive again. Instructions to follow."

Then Pete looked at the Polaroid photo. It showed Diller sitting on a metal folding chair. His arms were stretched straight out behind him and tied to a wall, his mouth was covered with a

wide band of white tape, his legs were bound at the ankles. His famous blue eyes stared wildly with the look of someone who could see his death standing in front of him.

Pete's stomach twisted at the photo, feeling the ropes biting into his own wrists and ankles, the tape sealing his own mouth. Stick to facts, not feelings, he told himself. That's what Jupe always says.

Pete high-geared it out of Marty's office with the ransom note hidden in his pocket and headed straight for the photocopier down the hall. He was glad he had noticed it on the way in. Good detective work, Pete, he congratulated himself.

He made several copies of the note and the horrible photo, too. When he got back to Morningbaum's office, he breezed past the secretary saying, "I think I left something in there." Luckily she just nodded and didn't follow him in. Quickly Pete put the note back inside Morningbaum's desk.

Now what? This wasn't just a mystery anymore. It was a kidnapping case, a matter of life and death. And no matter how much he had wanted to handle it alone, he couldn't risk it when Diller's life was at stake. There was only one thing to do. Pete picked up the telephone and dialed a familiar number.

"Jupe? Pete. Don't go anywhere. Wait for me.

I've got to talk to you and Bob. I can't talk now." He hung up just as the door opened.

Marty Morningbaum's secretary stared at Pete. "What are you doing?"

"Had to call my girl. Sorry," Pete said. He tossed the keys to the Jag on Marty's desk and walked quickly to the door.

Now with no car, Pete scrounged a lift back to Rocky Beach from a crew member. After a quick stop at home, he parked his car in the junkyard outside the Three Investigators' headquarters. He hopped out and bolted toward the trailer, but before he could open the door, Jupe called out to him from inside. "Hold it! You're wearing a green T-shirt, blue jeans, and your grubby basketball shoes. Right?"

"How'd you know that?" Pete asked. Bob opened the door to the trailer. "Look up," he said.

Above Pete's head was a color video camera attached to the trailer and turning from side to side, surveying the area. It was Jupe's new security system, which he had been working on for weeks. Inside, the monitor sat in front of Jupe on his desk.

"Cool," Pete said as he stepped into the headquarters. "But listen, guys. I've got heavy news. Diller Rourke's been kidnapped from his Malibu beach house. I just happened to be there at a meeting this afternoon when Marty

Morningbaum—the producer—got a ransom note."

"That was fast work, Pete. The trail is still hot," said Jupe. "Let's hear the details."

Pete pushed the color monitor aside, sat down on the desk, and rubbed his hands nervously on his jeans. "Well… some of this you're not going to like. See, I mean, the trail isn't too hot anymore, because, well…"

"What?" Bob demanded. "Spit it out!"

"Because Diller was probably kidnapped three days ago," Pete confessed.

"He was kidnapped three days ago, but you just discovered that fact now?" Jupe asked.

"Huh—uh. I knew about it three days ago," Pete said. In the silence Pete saw a small pout beginning to form on Jupe's mouth. "I know what you're going to say about the three of us sticking together and all that stuff—and you're right. The truth is, at first I didn't want you guys to help me. But now I do."

Jupe pouted for a minute more, but then he gave a little shrug. "Oh, well, I guess I don't mind that you did a little preliminary investigating."

"I'm glad you feel that way, Jupe," Pete said with a sly grin, "because I sort of told Mr. Morningbaum that I was the brains of this group,

and I was calling in my assistants to help."

Bob burst out laughing.

"I will soon disabuse him of that erroneous perception," Jupe huffed.

"It was a joke, Jupe!" Bob said. "Clues you catch on to real fast. Jokes take longer."

Jupe's face flushed red. "Could I please see the ransom note?" he said, holding out his hand. Pete showed them the photocopies of the ransom note and the hideous Polaroid.

"Whew," Bob said. "Ugly scene."

"If you're worried about Diller Rourke's physical well-being, I wouldn't be," Jupe said. "This photo was obviously staged to be as upsetting as possible. Notice that his arms are pinned back very far. If he remained like that for very long, he'd be unable to breathe and would probably faint. His abductors need to keep Diller in good shape for him to remain valuable."

"You know, there's something interesting about the ransom note," Bob said. "These words seem to be cut out of a newspaper. But it's not the *L.A. Times* or the *Herald-Examiner*. It's some other paper's headline type."

"What do you think? The note was sent from outside Los Angeles?" Pete asked.

"A very logical possibility, Pete," said Jupe. "Good thinking."

"Thanks," Pete said, beaming. "And there's a bunch of other weird stuff you'd better hear about this case, too."

Pete started with the rumors about *The Suffocation* being a jinxed film and told them about Marble Ackbourne-Smith, his crystals, and his warning that Pete was in danger. "He saw it with his third eye. Then he said I should listen to the crystal," Pete said.

"If you start listening to crystals, you are in danger—of losing your mind!" Jupe said.

They talked until it got dark. Suddenly Pete said, "I need some food." So they left Headquarters and drove off in Pete's Vega. The night was crisp and there were witches and ghosts and skeletons everywhere.

"Hey, we forgot," Pete said. "Tonight's Halloween."

They cruised for a while, looking for kids from school. But mostly they just saw small groups of pint-sized trick-or-treaters. A few of them looked exactly like the blood-crazed zombies from *The Suffocation*.

After a pizza, when Pete braked at a stop sign, he turned on his windshield wipers. The wipers began to swing back and forth and then thick red blood squirted onto the windshield.

"What's that?" Jupe said, taken totally by surprise.

"Oh, no. I must have run over something juicy," Pete said with an innocent face.

"Unbelievable!" Bob said. "You rigged your car up like that stunt Jaguar, didn't you?"

Pete laughed. After that he only turned on the blood at traffic lights when they could gross out the maximum number of people.

Finally they drove back to Headquarters. Halfway down the block Jupe pressed a remote-control button and an electronic door opener cranked open the main iron gates to the junkyard.

"Hey, look!" Bob said as soon as the car pulled up. "The trailer door has been kicked in!"

"That's not all," Jupe said with alarm. "The windows have been smashed!"

"Someone must have jumped the gate," Pete said angrily.

They piled out of Pete's car and ran into the trailer. The Three Investigators' files had been pulled open and dumped on the floor. The desk was covered with a thick blizzard of paper.

"I don't believe it. The place has been trashed!" Bob said.

Pete started feeling as if the walls were coming toward him. He let out a low moan.

"Pete—what's wrong?" Bob asked.

"It's the glass," Pete said. "We're stepping on

glass, just like at Diller Rourke's house. I feel like I'm suffocating. I can't breathe."

Jupe walked over and pulled down sheets of newspaper that had been taped to the wall. He gasped when he read the message that was painted underneath. "Looks like you're right. This is about Diller Rourke," Jupe said in a shaky voice.

Pete and Bob looked up and read the message at the same time. It said: Diller Rourke's blood is on your hands!

5
The Suffocation: Rated Zzzzz!

"I can't breathe!" Pete repeated, he gulped for air. "I feel like I'm suffocating."

"It's your imagination," Jupe said, but he quickly opened the trailer door wider to let in more crisp October air. A couple of firecrackers suddenly exploded far away, down the street.

"It's going to take us years to clean up this mess," Bob moaned, looking around at the vandalized trailer.

"But more than that, someone's seen all of our secret files!" Jupe wailed. He pounded his meaty fists together.

"Calm down, Jupe," Bob said. Slowly he scanned the trailer with a puzzled look on his face. "Wait a minute. How did they even know we were working on this case?"

Jupe thought for a minute. "The kidnappers must have been keeping an eye on everyone connected with the film, including Pete," he said.

Pete helped Jupe lift an old metal file cabinet right-side up.

"Still, it's weird," Pete said. "The ransom note just came today, and I didn't even know I was being followed."

"Maybe we'll have a better idea of who we're

up against after we look at our vandals," Jupe said.

"What are you going to do? Invite them to dinner?" Bob asked.

"In due time, perhaps," Jupe said. "But right now I'm going to see if my new video security system has done its job."

"Hey—that's right! The camera! You might have these guys on tape," Pete said.

"That's great," Bob said. "But how much tape do we have to watch before the vandals show up?"

"Give me a break," Jupe said as he rewound the tape. "Would I design a system with flaws? I've hidden an electric eye outside. When someone comes close to Headquarters, he or she trips the eye and that starts the video recorder. When they leave, the camcorder turns off."

Jupe pressed the play button and they watched the small color monitor. When the picture clicked on, the three friends leaned in close for a better look. But what they saw made them move back.

A tall, thin, eerie figure came out from the darkness to fill the screen. He seemed to sweep toward the trailer as if he were gliding, not walking. His long black cape puffed in the breeze.

Jupe suddenly hit the pause button so they

could study his horrible, hypnotizing face.

It was fluorescent green, with smoldering red eyes like hot coals, and his cheeks were dark, deep hollows. He looked as if he were in pain—a pain that burned from the inside out.

"Wow," Pete said in a low voice.

Jupe started the tape again. The eerie figure looked behind him and all around him, once, twice. Then, confident that no one was watching, he raised his foot and gave the door to the trailer a solid kick. The door banged open and the intruder entered Headquarters, disappearing from the camera's view. In a few minutes he left, his cape flowing behind him as he quickly walked away.

"Who is he?" asked Bob.

"What is he?" asked Pete.

They watched the videotape again and again, each time noticing something else about the intruder.

"He's got fangs," Bob said.

"He's wearing a ring with a large jewel on his right hand," Jupe said.

When they had memorized every move the figure made and every ghoulish detail about him, they turned off the machine.

"You gotta admit it's the perfect crime," Pete said. "Dress up in a vampire costume on

Halloween so no one can recognize you. In a disguise like that you could get away with murder." The word hit them like fake blood shot from a splatter gun.

"All right. It's time for a plan," Jupe said. "Pete, tomorrow you'll take us to the studio. We need to establish some suspects by talking to the people who knew Diller best—and saw him last."

But when they got to the studio the next day after school, the first person they ran into was Pete's dad.

He was walking across the studio lot carrying an exploding face mask.

"Hey, guys. You're just in time," said Mr. Crenshaw. "I'm going over to look at the dailies to see how my effects are coming out. Want to take a look?"

As they followed Mr. Crenshaw to a private screening room on the studio lot, Bob asked, "What are dailies?"

"That's what they call all the film that was shot each day," Pete said, feeling proud to be an expert on—something Bob didn't know. "It's all the unedited takes, full of mistakes and everything."

The screening room was like a miniature theater with six rows of red plush velvet movie seats. Each seat in the front row had an intercom button on the arm. Pete's dad sat down, hit the

talk button, and asked the projectionist to play the film.

The lights dimmed and the film began to roll.

The Three Investigators watched all the special effects scenes shot in the past week. Ordinary everyday situations—but every one of them had a bloody Jon Travis twist to it.

In one scene a little kid had a bad case of hiccups.

"I know how to fix those," said the boy's mother, who had turned into a zombie. "I'll scare you."

Then, without saying another word, she ripped off the boy's arm. Blood squirted from his shoulder as he screamed in pain.

"See. No more hiccups," she said.

"Cut!" yelled Jon Travis from offscreen. "How can you top perfection?"

In another scene a man sneezed, then stared in horror into his handkerchief, which was filled with his own brains!

Jupe leaned over to Bob and whispered, "Jon Travis is an intense personality."

"Takes one to know one," Bob whispered back.

Then they watched Diller Rourke in some of his scenes. When he turned into a zombie, dark circles of makeup under his eyes produced the

desired effect.

"I know you wanted me to go to Harvard, Dad," Diller the zombie said on the screen. "But I'm happier biting peoples' faces off."

"Who wrote this script?" Pete whispered loudly. "Lassie?"

"Ouch," said Pete's dad. "Take it easy, guys. This is my job you're talking about."

A new scene came on, with Diller and a beautiful young actress. She was short, with curly dark hair and even curlier eyelashes. Exactly Jupe's type.

"Isn't that Victoria Jansen?" asked Jupe, leaning forward.

"Right," said Mr. Crenshaw. "She's sort of the co-star of the film, although her face explodes in the first twenty minutes. She and Diller used to date each other. In this scene she's baby-sitting and doesn't know that Diller has just eaten the two little kids upstairs in their bedrooms."

"You've got to believe me, Kathy," Diller was saying on the screen to Victoria, "I get these weird feelings. It's like I can't breathe. I feel like I'm in a grave and all these guys are shoveling heavy dirt on top of me. It makes me want to kill somebody."

"Oh, Diller," said the actress in Diller Rourke's arms. "It's only your imagination. You wouldn't

hurt a fly."

"Cut!" yelled Jon Travis offscreen. "Victoria, you called him Diller!"

"I'll bet they release this movie during Thanksgiving," Bob commented.

"Why?" Pete asked.

"Because that's when everyone wants some turkey!"

Pete and Jupe cracked up and started making gobbling noises and hooting.

"Come on, guys. Is it really that bad?" asked Mr. Crenshaw.

Pete and Bob waited for Jupe to comment. He had been a movie star when he was a tiny kid and always had strong opinions about films—along with everything else, of course.

"The script is ridiculous and the director is totally out of control," Jupe said. "This is what always happens when a low-budget director like Jon Travis has one big hit. The studio triples the budget for his next film, gives him total artistic control, and the guy becomes a total egomaniac. *Mondo Grosso* went to Travis's head. You wanted to hear the truth, didn't you, Mr. Crenshaw?"

"Give me a minute to think about that, Jupiter," said Pete's dad with a strained smile.

When they'd seen all the dailies, Pete, Jupe, and Bob got up to start roaming the studio,

sniffing for clues about Diller Rourke. But Pete's dad stopped them. "Marty Morningbaum called me in this morning, Pete," Mr. Crenshaw said. "He's afraid you guys will jeopardize Diller's safety with an amateur investigation."

"Dad—"

"I know," Mr. Crenshaw said. "You guys are good. But Marty's decided to go along with the kidnappers. And he told me to be sure you don't interfere. So—sorry, but I want you to leave."

No amount of protesting was going to change the truth—and the truth was that Pete had to do what his dad asked. So the Three Investigators grudgingly piled back into Pete's car and drove into the glittery lights of L.A. at sundown.

With Pete at the wheel and Bob next to him in charge of the radio, Jupe sat in the back seat talking about what Jon Travis was doing wrong.

"He's obviously jealous of Diller Rourke's scene with Victoria Jansen."

"He is or you are?" asked Bob.

"He's photographing her with terrible lighting and the angles are completely wrong," Jupe insisted.

They were stopped at a light. Bob flipped the radio dial, looking for bands he might know from his job at the talent agency. Suddenly Pete ripped open his seat belt and ran out of the car, leaving

the door open. They were across from a Tex-Mex Burger Bar-B-Q Pit. Cars behind them started honking.

"Are you berserk?" Jupe yelled as Pete sprinted across the street toward the restaurant.

"It's Kelly! With another guy!" Pete shouted back. He darted across the road, spun away from pedestrians, and hurdled the row of cactuses that bordered the restaurant. Pete's target was a shiny black late-model Escort EXP parked in the Tex-Mex lot. A girl was getting in on the passenger side.

He got there just as a guy, a tall guy with dark hair cut in a flattop, pulled open the driver's door. Even though the guy looked like a body builder, Pete grabbed him by the T-shirt and pushed him away. Then Pete dipped his head through the door. "What's the big idea, Kelly?" he said.

"What's the big idea yourself?" asked the girl sitting in the passenger seat. It wasn't Kelly.

Pete felt like a jerk… a complete jerk. Then he felt hands grabbing his shoulders from behind and spinning him around. "What's your problem, mold-face?" the guy snarled.

Pete had only a second to decide what to do next. Tell this guy it was a mistake or try to drop him with a couple of his patented lightning karate chops? Before he could choose, the big guy slipped in a quick hard one to Pete's stomach that

knocked the wind out of him.

"Hey, it was a mistake!" Pete said, breathing hard. "I thought your girl was my girl."

"Can't you keep track of your girlfriends?" asked the other guy.

"We had a fight. A big one," Pete explained.

"Well, she's not in my car, Jack. So look somewhere else."

"Yeah," Pete said, watching the guy climb into his black car and speed away.

I'd better call Kelly, Pete thought to himself, before she gets really mad. But before he could find a phone, Jupe and Bob came up to him.

"Boy, you've got a strange way of making new friends," Bob said.

"Ha, ha. Let's just get something to eat. I'm hungry," Pete said as they walked back toward his car.

"We can go to my house," Bob said. "My mom's out tonight."

Half an hour later the Three Investigators were mounting a full-scale attack on Bob's kitchen. Jupe stuck the copy of the ransom note on the refrigerator with a small magnet so they could look at it and keep talking about the case while they ate. Then Jupe sat down in front of a tall cheese and sprouts on pumpernickel sandwich, just staring at it.

“Aren’t you going to eat, Jupe?” Bob asked.

“Mental discipline,” Jupe said. “That’s part of my new diet. My body will eat when I say it can. To prove that I’m in control, I always wait fifteen minutes.”

“Yeah—then you clean your plate like a vacuum cleaner!” Pete said.

Jupe ignored Pete’s joke and stared hard at the sandwich. “Laugh if you want. I’m showing this sandwich who’s the boss around here!”

“Has this been scientifically tested?” Bob asked Pete. “I mean, if he totally dominates that food, will the calorie count go down?”

“Oh, shut up,” Jupe tried to say through a mouthful of bread, sprouts, and cheese.

Bob turned his attention to the ransom note stuck on the fridge door. “ ‘Instructions to follow,’ ” he read. “Do you think Marty Morningbaum has gotten his instructions yet?”

Just then Bob’s father came into the kitchen. “Excuse me, guys. I’ve got to get a cup of coffee,” he said. Mr. Andrews opened the refrigerator for some low-fat milk. “What’s this?” he asked, nodding toward the ransom note.

“We’re working on a case, Dad,” Bob said.

Mr. Andrews had worked for a Los Angeles newspaper for years. He studied the ransom note while he sipped his coffee. “Hey, Bob. These

words were all cut out of *Daily Variety*. Did you know that?"

"*Daily Variety*? That's the show-business trade newspaper," Pete said. "Are you certain, Mr. Andrews?" Jupe asked.

"Jupiter, I know newspapers the way you know diets," Bob's father said as he left the kitchen. Jupe pinched his lower lip, deep in thought.

"You know what this means, don't you?" Jupe's voice grew unusually quiet. "It means that whoever kidnapped Diller Rourke is probably involved in the movie business. Maybe even in *The Suffocation II*"

6
The Young and the Restless

EVERYONE IN THE KITCHEN WAS SILENT FOR A minute. They just stared at the ransom note.

"Someone on the crew kidnapped Diller Rourke?" Bob said, repeating Jupe's conclusion.

"Or an actor, maybe," Jupe said. "I'm sure of it. Ordinary criminals don't read Variety, But everyone in show business does. It's practically Hollywood's bible. Yes, with this clue I think we've got this case practically solved."

Pete and Bob knew that was Jupiter Jones talk for "We've got our first strong lead."

"All we need is a suspect, a motive, and the location where Diller Rourke is being held," Pete said.

"Details, details," said Jupe. "All we really need is to focus this investigation logically. That is, question the cast and crew of *The Suffocation II* and sift out Diller's friends from his enemies. And as for a plan, I'm in favor of starting with Victoria Jansen, the actress we saw in the dailies."

"I'll bet you are," Bob said.

"After all, she was filming with Diller the day before he disappeared," Jupe said. "And Pete's

father said they used to be romantically involved."

"Used to be? Hey, that means there's still a chance for you, Jupe," Pete said with a grin.

"Yeah, maybe she likes the weak, talkative type," Bob teased.

"You mean the robust, articulate type," Jupe corrected. "Hey—I'm ready."

"Anyway, Jupe, I've got bad news for you. Victoria Jansen is not going to be easy to talk to," Pete said. "My dad says she's super private and a real nut about disguise. She makes a game about no one recognizing her in public."

"A nut about disguise…" Jupe said. "I wonder where she was on Halloween?"

<—? ? ?—>

It wasn't until the next afternoon that Pete's faded orange Vega roared into The Jones Salvage Yard, its horn beeping. "Jupe! Let's go! I found her."

Jupe came out of his electronics workshop, a shed next to their trailer headquarters. "What's going on?"

"Come on. Get in. My dad just told me some hot news," Pete said, speeding off. "Victoria Jansen is hanging out at a retirement home in Anaheim, doing research for her next movie."

"Victoria Jansen? Stop the car!" Jupe shouted.

Pete braked and Jupe jumped out. He ran into his house across the street, returning ten minutes later in a clean pair of jeans and an ironed oxford dress shirt. “Now I’m ready,” he said. “Where’s Bob?”

“Couldn’t come.” Pete and Jupe said it together. “Sax Sendler needed him to work at the music agency—as usual,” Pete explained.

Jupe groaned. “Sometimes I think we should call ourselves the Two and a Half Investigators.”

After more than an hour of hard driving, Pete pulled into the parking lot of a three-building retirement complex.

“Sylvan Woods Rest Home,” Jupe read. “Talk about false advertising. It’s not sylvan, and there are no woods anywhere—just a freeway.”

“Well, it won’t be hard to find Victoria Jansen here,” Pete said, looking around at all of the white-haired people.

“Yes, I know,” said Jupiter. “She’d stand out in any crowd, but especially this one.”

They walked around the facilities, checking the game room, the TV room, the card room. The elderly residents were sitting in chairs or strolling around the grounds with their canes and walkers. They were talking, crocheting, gardening, and reading. Everyone seemed to notice the two teenagers but at first no one spoke to them.

“Hey, sonny.”

Jupe and Pete turned toward a bench that was shaded by a large palm tree. An old woman, her gray hair drooping and unpinned under a large straw hat, was motioning to them with a crooked finger. She sat on the bench with a light blanket over her lap, covering her legs.

Pete and Jupe walked over to her and she patted the bench for them to sit down. Her smile creased her wrinkled skin even more. “My name’s Maggie. You look lost.”

“We’re looking for a woman,” Jupe said.

“What am I? Chopped liver?” said Maggie. The old woman accompanied her remark with a quick bat of her eyelashes.

Jupe smiled. “We’re looking for someone younger,” he said,

“You mean like Rosie? She’s sixty-eight,” Maggie said.

“We’re looking for a young woman, an actress,” Jupe explained.

“You fellas reporters or something?”

“No, we’re detectives,” Pete said.

“Oh, detectives? Got a heater? Got a rod? Got a gat?” said Maggie, using all the old-fashioned words for gun.

“No, we’re not TV detectives,” Pete said.

"We need to ask her some questions about someone who needs our help," Jupe said, looking around. Then he looked straight at Maggie. "You will help us, won't you, Miss Jansen?" he asked.

Maggie pushed her hat back on her head and her gray wig came off with it. Victoria Jansen's dark curls came bubbling out from under it. She was a strange sight, with her old face and young, vibrant hair. "How did you know?" she asked, her voice suddenly sounding much younger.

"The dialogue. 'Got a heater? Got a rod? Got a gat?'" Jupe said. "You said that in *The French Agent*, which I happened to rent two weeks ago."

"You keep your eyes and ears open, don't you?" Now that the actress was speaking as herself, she seemed nervous. She sat up straight, losing the bent-over posture of an old woman. She took off the lap robe, revealing her slender legs in tight blue jeans.

"In my next film I'm playing a character named Maggie who ages from twenty to eighty. I realized that I don't know the first thing about being eighty. So I came over here to watch. A good actor has to be a good observer." She looked directly at Jupe. "Ever think of being an actor?"

"Are you kidding?" Pete said. "Jupe used to be __"

But the rest of Pete's sentence, "Baby Fatso in

the movies," was drowned out by Jupiter clearing his throat as loudly as he could.

"We want to talk to you about Diller Rourke," Jupe said. The actress shook her head. "That's personal, guys."

"We're not looking for gossip," Jupe said. "We need information. When was the last time you saw him? What did you talk about? Did he say anything about anyone threatening him? We don't care about your romantic involvement with him."

"Well, I care," she answered. She squirmed on the bench and played with a ring on her right hand. "We had something going for about a year and then he just dropped me. It made a loud noise and it hurt. I was such a mess I even turned down work."

"Are you saying that you wouldn't mind if he were in serious trouble?" Jupe asked.

"I didn't say that. He's a guy who likes to take walks. He took one from me. He took one from the movie," Victoria said. She looked over at Pete. "You don't say much."

"I know what it's like to be dumped, too," Pete said, thinking of Kelly. He'd been trying to reach her for days. "But I was at Diller's house last Friday morning. I know he's in trouble."

After a moment, Victoria said, "I was there the night before."

"You were?" asked Jupe.

"We had dinner at his house, for old time's sake," she said. "I'd finished my work on *The Suffocation* that day. What was I? The last person to see him before he took off or something?"

"No," Jupe said. "The kidnappers saw him last."

"Kidnappers?" The word gave Victoria a chill. "Does Marty know?"

"He got the ransom note," Pete answered.

"Poor Marty. It must be killing him."

"Can you tell us about your evening with Diller?"

"We had a nice dinner. He was even making jokes about being an idiot for dumping me. He was okay that night."

"Could you tell us who Diller's friends and enemies are?" Jupe asked.

"I could give you a suspect list a mile long," said Victoria. "Try Richard Faber. He was supposed to get the starring role in *The Suffocation II* until suddenly Diller got it. Or maybe that New Age guru of his had something to do with the kidnapping. Diller always does what Marble Ackbourne-Smith tells him to do."

"You've been very helpful," Jupe said.

"I hope I don't regret it," the actress said,

adjusting her hat and her wig and returning to her craggy Maggie voice. “Well, boys, sure you don’t want to stick around? We’re all going to try on each other’s false teeth later.”

Pete and Jupe laughed and said goodbye to Victoria. As they climbed back into Pete’s car, Jupe said, “First thing tomorrow after school, we go back to the movie studio—no matter what your dad says.”

“No way,” said Pete. “I’ve got to try to make up with Kelly tomorrow. I haven’t seen her for days.”

“Kelly can wait,” Jupe said. “Marty Morningbaum may have heard from the kidnappers by then. And you can talk to him and keep him busy.”

“Keep him busy? For what?”

“Let’s just say I’m going to take a tour of the studio—an unofficial tour of the studio,” was Jupe’s reply.

Keep Marty Morningbaum busy. Right, Pete thought. And he thought it again the next day as he sat outside Marty’s office.

But how was he supposed to do it? With fast talk and sneaky tricks? That was Bob and Jupe’s department. Well, too bad. If they could do it, Pete could at least try. Hey, Marty, how about those Rams? And have you heard the joke about…

Fortunately for Pete, however, Marty Morningbaum wasn't even there. He was keeping himself busy. Pete glanced around the reception room. The guy sitting on the chair across from Pete was waiting for Morningbaum too. He had thick dark hair that was slicked back, and he was wearing sunglasses with bright blue frames. He tapped his fingers, he tapped his feet. High-energy guy. Not very tall, but strong.

Occasionally he did push-ups on Marty's thick rug.

"Bench press two-ten," he told Pete.

"Two-twenty," Pete said.

The guy cleared away a wooden coffee table and squatted on his knees, resting his right elbow on the table, open palm in the air.

"Arm wrestling in a movie producer's office?"

"Why not?" asked the guy.

Pete got down on his knees and set his right arm. He locked palms and fingers with the guy and stared into his eyes.

"Go!" the guy said.

The table shook as each tried to force the other's hand down. Pete held on, saving his strength. He's got power, he thought, but not stamina. Then the other guy blinked. He's getting tired. Now! Pete thought. He gave it everything he had, driving his opponent's hand to the table

top. The guy cried out—not in pain but in defeat. Just then Marty Morningbaum walked into his outer office. He looked confused at finding two people on their knees in his reception room.

Pete's opponent jumped to his feet and latched onto Morningbaum. "How long are you going to wait, Marty?" he said.

"Richard, will you calm yourself," said Marty Morningbaum in his patient voice. "Is yelling at me going to make you happy?"

"You want to make me happy, Marty? Make up your mind," said the young man. "I was supposed to have the lead in *The Suffocation II* in the first place.

"And the rumors are flying that Diller's taken a walk. You want to salvage this film? Shoot new principal camera work with me in the lead."

This guy didn't have to introduce himself now. Pete knew it was Richard Faber, the actor Victoria Jansen had told them about.

"Richard, it's out of my hands. You don't know. We'll talk soon," Marty said.

Richard glared at Pete. "Who's this? The next guy who's going to steal a role from me?" The fiery actor pushed past Pete to leave.

Marty gave Pete a tired look. His face was gray. "How are you, kid? We were very pleased with your car. Did you want to speak to me?"

Pete took a deep breath and followed Marty into his large office. On Marty's desk was another piece of Pete's father's work—an eyeball with a fork in it. This movie is a turkey, Pete thought. He's got every dumb gag you can think of. "Mr. Morningbaum, I've been wondering about Diller. Have the kidnappers made contact with you?"

The producer shook his head. Then he picked up The Three Investigators' business card that Pete had given him. "I can trust you to stick to our plan of not getting involved, can't I, kid? I want everyone to do everything the kidnappers ask, so that nothing will happen to Diller."

Pete nodded. Convincingly, he hoped. "It's just strange. Usually they make contact fast. Take the money and run. I can't figure what they're waiting for."

"Do you know a lot about kidnappers, kid?" Marty asked with something like a smile.

"We've solved a kidnapping case or two," Pete said proudly. "I know you want me to back off," he added, "but I brought my friend Jupiter to the studio today. I thought maybe we could check into some of Diller's friends. They might know something."

Marty Morningbaum thought hard for a minute, staring off into space.

"Good idea, kid. I'll tell you who to start with.

Marble Ackbourne-Smith. There's definitely something flake-o about that guy."

The crystal, which Pete had been carrying in his pocket, suddenly seemed to get hot again.

"Thanks for the tip," Pete said as he hurried to find Jupe. By now Jupiter would have questioned three dozen people and probably discovered what Diller Rourke's favorite food was when he was twelve. But wait till Jupe heard about Pete's meeting with Richard Faber. The suspects were mounting up.

Pete looked all over the studio for almost an hour and couldn't find Jupe. He wasn't on the sound stage and he wasn't in the cafeteria. Where was he?

Suddenly Pete turned a corner in a scenery shop and almost tripped over something that some jerk had left in the middle of the floor. "Oh, no!" Pete cried out.

He couldn't believe his eyes. There on the floor was Jupiter Jones… flat on his back… with a big bloody gash across his throat!

7
Marble Jumps In

"NO!" PETE SHOUTED. FOR A MOMENT HE DIDN'T know whether to run for help or just stay there in case Jupe came to for a few last minutes on earth. Pete's cry roared and rumbled and died in the empty scenery shop.

He dropped to his knees, next to the lump-like body of his good friend. Anger and pain filled his chest, but when he tried to talk he had to fight back a sob. "Jupe, who did this to you?" Pete cried out. He slammed his hand on the concrete floor. "You gotta tell me, Jupe. You gotta tell me what to do now! I count on you to have the plans, Jupe."

Pete jumped up, his heart pounding with fear. Where could he find help? The gash in Jupe's throat was too horrible to contemplate. The body didn't move. He had to be dead…

Pete started breathing hard again, feeling the walls pressing in and the ceiling pressing down on him. "Jupe, you gotta tell me… you gotta tell me… you gotta tell me—why you aren't bleeding?" Pete suddenly finished, looking at the floor beside Jupe. He touched it. The floor was dry and dusty, not wet and bloody. Then he reached out his hand toward the deep red slash across Jupe's neck.

It was rubber.

"Movie makeup," Pete snarled, giving Jupe a shove. "Okay, joker, the gag's over. And it wasn't funny!" But Jupe still didn't move—not even after Pete gave him a good hard shake. This wasn't a joke. Something was wrong with Jupe. Pete quickly felt his friend's neck for a pulse. "He's not dead, but he sure is out." What was going on around here?

Slowly Jupe's head began to roll on his neck as if it needed tightening. A low moan came from his dry lips. Finally he opened his eyes.

"Welcome back," Pete said with a smile. "Don't forget to stop at baggage claim and pick up your head." Jupe stared at Pete without moving or speaking. "Can't you talk?"

"Shh," scolded Jupiter. "I'm reconstructing everything that happened."

"Do it out loud."

Jupe sat up, weaving unsteadily. "Let's see…" he began. "I was nosing around where Jon Travis was setting up to film some interior scenes for the movie. And I was talking with crew members. They gave me some crucial information."

"About Diller?"

"Well, no. About dieting, as a matter of fact," Jupe said with a small grin.

"Jupe!"

"Protein milk shakes, Pete. That's what all the stars use to maintain their weight. And they said it really works. So naturally I went directly over to the studio commissary to get one. While I was waiting for my drink, I noticed a very large man watching every move I made. Of course, I acted as if I hadn't noticed him. But as I left with my milk shake he blocked the doorway.

"For a moment we looked at each other. And then he said, 'In life, what's important is not what we find but that we have something to look for.' "

"Oh, no. I don't believe it," Pete said, smacking his forehead with his hand. "That had to be Marble Ackbourne-Smith."

"It was indeed," said Jupiter. He stood up and took a few shaky steps. Pete reached out, ready to catch him if he fell.

"I'm all right," Jupe said. "Let me go on. I couldn't leave the commissary with my milk shake because this Marble person wanted to give me the answers to everything—everything except the questions I asked him. Finally I asked him when was the last time he saw Diller Rourke. "I see him every day,' he said."

"You're kidding. Where?"

" 'My third eye can see him,' he told me. Third eye? He doesn't know how to use the two he's got. Then I said to him, 'Where is Diller

Rourke?' He was just about to tell me when Marty Morningbaum came up to us. He recognized me, of all things—as Baby Fatso! He said they were trying out some new horror makeup and would I like to let them try it on me." Jupe pulled the gory rubber slice off his neck. He had to pull hard to loosen the rubber cement. "As you can see, I agreed to be their guinea pig since I thought it would give me an opportunity to speak with Morningbaum further. But I was wrong. He took me to the makeup department and left me. A while later he came back to inspect the job. But before I could ask him anything, his watch beeped and he ran out."

"What did you do then?" asked Pete.

"I went back to the commissary, where I had left Marble and my milk shake. Marble was gone but my milk shake was there. I drank the rest as I walked back here. I don't remember what happened after that—until I saw you."

"The milk shake was drugged, Jupe. It had to be. And I'll bet Marble did it." Pete looked around.

"If you're looking for the milk shake cup—forget it. It was right there on the bench, and it's gone," Jupe said. "So I think we'd better talk to Marble Ackbourne-Smith. The sooner the better."

Marble Ackbourne-Smith was not difficult to find. He had an ad in the Los Angeles yellow

pages under Spiritual Consultants. It read: "Marble Ackbourne-Smith, seer, prognosticator, healer, channeler, notary public. The world is my answering machine. It leaves messages for me and I return its calls."

The address in the ad led Pete and Jupe to a large, long white ranch house in Beverly Hills. The front door was standing wide open, even though the house was filled with expensive furniture and paintings. Pete and Jupe knocked. When no one answered, they walked in and went through the house to the back. There, by a diamond-shaped swimming pool, Marble sat in the warm evening air. He was bare chested, wearing loose long white linen pants, with his legs folded in the lotus position. The moon was rising and a single evening star twinkled in the sky like the lights in the pool.

"Jupe, I know this guy from somewhere," Pete whispered.

"Of course. You saw him several days ago. He gave you a pink tourmaline," answered Jupe impatiently. "No. From somewhere else," Pete said. Jupe shrugged and approached the muscular blond cross-legged man by the pool.

There were four large blue crystals around Marble, making a perfect square. He held a red stone in his hand. There were small white crystals tucked inside his ears and a gold rock in his navel. His eyes were closed. "Mr. Ackbourne-

Smith, I want to continue the conversation we were having," Jupe said, trying to get Marble's attention.

Without opening his eyes, Marble said, "I can't hear you. I have a crystal in my ear."

"New age. Old jokes," muttered Jupe.

"The crystals in my ears block out negative vibrations that jar our deeper understanding of who we could become if only we were someone else," Marble said. "They also tell me that a poison has invaded your body."

"I doubt if you needed a crystal to tell you that, since I suspect you are the person who poisoned me," Jupe said. "What exactly did you put in my protein milk shake?"

Marble laughed, stood up, and rearranged the crystals on the ground by the swimming pool. "It's almost six o'clock," he said. "Time for my daily swim." With that, he made a running leap into the deep end of his diamond-shaped pool.

Pete and Jupe watched Marble thrash about wildly as his head bobbed in and out of the water. His eyes grew large and his mouth filled with water. "He's not much of a swimmer," said Jupe.

"Jupe, he can't swim a stroke!" Pete suddenly realized. He yanked off his shoes and dived into the water after Marble. In clean, strong strokes he reached the drowning man in seconds. He wrapped his arm around Marble's neck from

behind and towed the large man to the side.

It took all of Pete's and Jupe's strength to haul Marble out of the pool.

When Marble was finally out, Jupe said, "Why did you do that? You could have drowned if we hadn't been here."

"You weren't here yesterday," Marble said. "I swam then."

"We're not going to be here in another minute, either," Jupiter said in frustration. Pete took one look at his friend and knew that Marble had really pushed Jupe's tension button. "I'm going to be very direct with you," Jupe went on. "Diller Rourke has been kidnapped. I suspect you know something about it that you are not telling us. That's your decision. But don't think for a moment that it will stop us from finding out everything we need to know about you."

Pete saw that Jupe's words pushed a few of Marble's tension buttons too. For an instant a tight-lipped glare pushed aside the guru's contented smile. But Marble centered himself again just as quickly.

"I cannot tell you where Diller is," he said. "But Diller can tell me where he is."

"Are you expecting him to call?" asked Jupe.

"Diller is a student of mine," Marble explained. "The first thing I do is give my students their

own crystals. Our crystals become tuned to us. They know us. They know our thoughts, our dreams. They help us pick out our clothes. And when we are miles away, they are lonely for us."

"In twenty-five words or less, what are you trying to say?" Jupe demanded, ready to explode.

"Bring me Diller's crystals and I will tune them and program them and channel with them," Marble said.

"Sounds like cable TV," muttered Pete.

Marble closed his eyes. "Bring me the crystals. They will tell me where Diller is."

"Crystals are going to tell you where Diller Rourke is? Right." Pete drew out the last word as he shook his head in disbelief. "What if the crystals don't know? What if they're having a bad day and don't feel like telling you?"

"Crystals are the universal lost and found," Marble said.

This guy's so full of baloney he'd qualify for cafeteria food, Pete thought. But to Pete's surprise, Jupe said, "Okay, it's a deal. We'll find the crystals and bring them to you as fast as we can."

8
Crystal Unclear

PETE GRUMBLED ALL THE WAY TO HIS CAR. “I’m telling you, Jupe, I know this guy from somewhere. I just can’t remember from where. And how come you agreed to look for the crystals? Usually you steamroller a guy like that, with all of the philosophy books you’ve read.”

Jupe smiled as he got into Pete’s car and buckled the seat belt. “You’re right, but I couldn’t do that this time. There is something that Marble Ackbourne-Smith wants to tell us. Or something he’s hiding—I’m not sure which. Either way, we have to play along with him if we want to learn more. Besides, if we do find Diller’s crystals, we may also find a clue.”

The first logical place to look for the crystals was Diller Rourke’s Malibu beach house. Pete drove and Jupe talked on and on about his theories regarding Marble, Jon Travis, Richard Faber, and even Victoria Jansen.

After about an hour, Pete turned unexpectedly into a Chicken Coop restaurant. “Are you hungry?” Jupe asked.

“No, I just want to watch you stare down some fried chicken,” Pete said. “At least you’ll be quiet for fifteen minutes.”

After the pit stop, Pete drove straight to Diller's house. But when they got out of the car, Pete was reluctant to go in. He approached the front door cautiously. It was still unlocked.

Pete peered inside. Nobody had righted the furniture or the odd four-footed sculpture.

"The place hasn't been touched," Pete said.

"Lead the way," ordered Jupe.

So Pete stepped in. Crunch, crunch. The shards of broken glass were now mixed with a fine layer of sand, which the wind had blown up from the beach.

"A prime-time fight must have gone on here," Pete said.

"I see what you mean," said Jupe, surveying the topsy-turvy room. He squatted down and examined the floor. "This glass is not from crystals. The pieces are uneven. A crystal, when it breaks, shatters into smaller crystals."

"So where'd it come from?"

"It's a mystery," Jupe said ruefully.

When they began to search the house for Diller's crystals, Pete set to work in the living room. A while later Jupe called loudly from the back of the house.

"Look at this!"

Pete dashed down the hall and into the back

bedroom, which faced the ocean. There he found Jupiter Jones squatting by a bookshelf, looking at a book.

"Autographed copies of Marble Ackbourne-Smith's books," Jupe said, and then began to read their titles aloud. "*Infinity Stops Here*. *Out-of-Body Experiences, or How to Be Your Own Best Travel Agent*. *The Third Eye Book of Optical Illusions*. *Getting Rich by Going Broke: An Autobiography*."

Pete suddenly felt as though he couldn't breathe. "The crystals aren't here, Jupe. I'm going back to the car. Let's look somewhere else."

Thirty minutes passed before Jupe joined Pete in his car outside of Diller's house. "What took you so long?" Pete asked. "I used the phone to call Victoria Jansen," Jupe explained. "She said that Diller never filmed a single day without his crystals. He used his topaz when he was doing a horror scene, his amethyst when he was doing a romantic scene, and his quartz when he was filming the 'buried alive' scene, which they were supposed to shoot the day he disappeared. She said they did close-ups of Diller in his casket the day before."

"So where are we going?" Pete asked. "To the movie studio?"

"To the cemetery," Jupe said.

“Cemetery! Jupe, why do our cases always end up in a cemetery? I’ve spent so much of my life in cemeteries, I ought to have my mail sent there! Can’t we do something different for a change and go there during the day?”

“You mean instead of the dead of night?” Jupe asked with a smile. “It is very possible that Diller Rourke left his crystals in the casket that was used during the filming last Thursday. And according to Victoria Jansen, the props and the film trucks are still at the cemetery.”

“But come on, Jupe. Not tonight. It’s more than fifty miles away. I bet it’ll even be midnight by the time we get there.”

Pete was wrong. It was exactly 11:59 p.m. when they killed the headlights across the street from Dalton Cemetery. A dry November wind whipped through the trees. It made the branches bend and sway as though they were having a conversation with each other.

“Maybe I should stay here and keep the motor running and the radio playing,” Pete said.

Jupe handed Pete a flashlight from the glove compartment. “Don’t worry. You’ve got your pink tourmaline crystal to protect you, don’t you?”

“Ha, ha. No, I left it at home,” Pete said. “It kept burning my pocket.”

They stepped out of the car into the dark night.

Clouds kept covering the moon. Crickets and small night animals loudly reported Pete's and Jupe's every move as they started down the slope into the graveyard. Suddenly Jupe stumbled and went rolling down the hill before Pete could grab him.

"What's the idea of pushing me?" Jupe said when he finally came to a stop.

"I didn't push you," Pete said, hurrying down the slope. "Didn't you trip on something?"

"I don't know," Jupe said, confused.

Somewhere in the distance a dog started barking and yipping. Then with a single yelp of pain, it stopped. Dead silence.

Pete led the way with his flashlight. "We've got to cross to the other side of the cemetery," he said. "The trucks are probably still parked on the service road there."

They followed their flashlight beams. Jupe aimed his in front, but Pete kept checking behind. He wasn't looking when something came swooping at them. Pete and Jupe felt its breeze and heard its mocking cry.

"What was that?" Pete asked, ducking. "It attacked me."

"An owl," Jupiter answered matter-of-factly. "From its call I'd identify it as a screech owl, indigenous to this area at this time of year."

"Never mind. I wasn't asking for a lecture," Pete said. He pointed with his flashlight in the direction of the service road. "It's over there. You go past an empty grave—that's where they were going to film. The casket should be in the truck marked Special Effects."

"Lead me to it," Jupe said.

"Wait. I thought I heard something."

"Come on," Jupe said, starting ahead. The grass was smooth and soft under their shoes. The wind brought a thick sweet aroma that seemed to stick to their clothing.

"Wait!" Pete repeated, grabbing Jupe's arm. "I thought I heard something again." They froze and listened… but the cemetery was silent.

"It's your imagination," Jupe said.

"You're not so sure, Jupe. I can hear it in your voice."

"Let's go."

Pete walked on reluctantly, trying to find his way in the dark. Were they in the right row of graves? Yes. They finally came to the freshly dug grave. They stood over it, shining their flashlights into the wet, gaping hole in the ground. But there were no movie trucks. The service road was empty.

"Where are the props and equipment trucks?" Jupe asked.

“They were here,” Pete said. “Looks like someone moved them.”

“Too bad. We came a long way for nothing,” said Jupe. He paused. “Did you hear a noise?”

Before Pete could answer, he felt a sharp, stinging blow to the back of his head—and heard Jupe cry out in pain. Pete and Jupe dropped into the open grave like dead men.

9
Cat and Mouse

PETE LANDED WITH A THUD AT THE BOTTOM OF the deep hole. Owww. There was a thumping, thumping in his brain. Where was he? What had happened? Oh, yeah—he had been hit on the back of the head with something heavy. A tree limb, maybe? Was Jupe hurt too?

Pete lifted his head—ow, that felt worse—and saw Jupe lying beside him, not moving. Then he let his head fall back to the soft earth again. A curtain seemed to be closing in front of Pete's eyes, but he fought it, trying to remain conscious. What had happened, again? Wake up, Pete, he told himself. Don't give in…

Then all of a sudden Pete heard a sound and realized something horrible. Whoever had whacked them from behind was still there! He was standing at the edge of the open grave! Pete tried to lift his head, but he couldn't.

Then Pete felt small pieces of something falling on his face.

Oh, no—it's dirt! He's shoveling dirt on us. He's burying us alive!

Someone looked over the edge of the grave. Pete couldn't see his face, but he saw dull moonlight reflect from the silvery shovel the guy

was holding. The figure stepped backward and the dirt began to fall again.

A sound came out of Pete, a screaming, angry sound he couldn't control. "Noooooo!"

Pete shook his head hard and rubbed his face with his hand. His hands were muddy from the grave and now his face smelled muddy, too. But the shower of dirt from above stopped.

Pete climbed to his knees and tried to stand up, steadying himself against the narrow walls of the grave. "Jupe! Get up!" Pete called. "Come on, Jupe. We've got to get out of here."

Jupe began to stir, helped by Pete practically lifting him by the shirt front.

"Okay, okay," Jupe said groggily. "Where… What…" He didn't seem to be able to finish sentences. But he was standing, shaking off the dirt.

Pete let go of Jupe and sprang to his next task. Using his hands and feet to dig and claw in the soft earth, he climbed out of the grave. No one was around. The graveyard was empty except for the crickets and the owls and the dog, who was barking again.

Pete reached down to help Jupe, who came up panting, still too dizzy to do much of the work. "Come on. Maybe we can catch this guy before he drives off," Pete said.

“No,” said Jupe, scraping some of the mud and muck off his shirt. “I think we’ll learn more by staying out of sight, so we can follow him.”

The headlights of a dark Camaro were just speeding down the street, heading back toward Los Angeles, as the two Investigators came up the hill of the cemetery. Pete climbed behind the wheel of his Vega and took off a minute later. He wound the little car out as far as he could in each gear, trying to keep the Camaro in sight.

They followed the Camaro through Huntington Beach and Long Beach and then on up into L.A. Then, as they approached a Beverly Hills neighborhood, the area began to look familiar. All too familiar.

“Weren’t we just here a few hours ago?” Pete said, checking out the houses and the street signs they were passing.

With the help of the streetlights Pete was able to get a glimpse of the guy driving the Camaro. He looked young—about nineteen—and he was wearing a white headband. A moment later the guy made a left turn into a familiar driveway. It was the driveway of Marble Ackbourne-Smith.

The front door of Marble’s house was still standing wide open, and the driver of the Camaro went right in. And so did Pete and Jupe.

In the wee, small hours of the morning, the large house was dimly lit with candles. Crystals

reflected the candlelight all over. Pete and Jupe walked through one room after another looking for Marble.

"I feel like a mouse that knows there's a trap," Pete said. "Even so, we still want the cheese," added Jupe.

Suddenly a door opened. From a large room lit by hundreds of flickering candles, Marble emerged with a man and a woman in their twenties.

"Thank you for seeing us, especially at this late hour," said the man, handing Marble a check. "I see you have more clients."

"Seekers of truth have lost their wrist watch," said Marble, looking quizzically at Jupe and Pete.

"I wish I could write down everything you ever said," said the young woman. "Thank you for contacting my first husband. I had to wish him a happy birthday at midnight. It's a tradition. Thanks again. Good night."

After the two people left, Marble said in a normal voice with a knowing smile, "You didn't find the crystals. I can sense it."

"No, but we have returned from the grave," Jupe said. Pete cracked up.

"We're looking for something else now," Jupe said. "A guy with a white headband."

Marble looked around. "I don't see anyone

here like that."

"Try your third eye," Pete said. "We followed him into your house," Jupe said.

Marble's face changed as though he had just been caught in a lie. "Oh, you must mean Harvey. One of my students. What do you want him for?"

"He tried to bury us alive a little while ago," said Jupe. "He attacked us in Dalton Cemetery when we were looking for Diller Rourke's crystals."

"Harvey?" Marble called softly in the hall. A moment later Harvey, with the white headband, appeared in the doorway.

"That's the guy," Pete said. His hands closed into fists immediately. "Why were you following us? What did you hit us for?"

"I have been in my room all night," said Harvey.

"That's a lie!" Pete said. "You must have followed us when we left here earlier!"

"I have been in my room all night," Harvey said again. Then he walked backward into his room, never taking his eyes off Marble.

"What's going on around here?" Pete said angrily.

"What goes on in this mellow house is something that will be a mystery to you until you can open your openness," Marble said.

Jupe rolled his eyes. “Oh, please. People always think they can hide things from us,” he said. “But my associates and I have always proven them wrong. You’re hiding something and I think it has to do with Diller Rourke.”

Marble’s shoulders shrugged. He didn’t say yes. He didn’t say no. He changed the subject. “Diller Rourke’s disappearance is a heartache to all who know him, including him. He has discovered his openness. He is like that marvelous sculpture called Finding the Path. It is a sculpture of four feet, all sharing the same leg and each pointing in a different direction.”

Pete suddenly broke in before Jupe could ask his next question. “When was the last time you were at Diller’s beach house?”

The question seemed to surprise Marble. “Diller’s beach house? I’ve never been there. The student comes to the teacher.”

“Then how did you know about that sculpture thing, the feet? That sculpture is in Diller’s beach house. I saw it there. It was one of the few things that wasn’t smashed up.”

“How *did* you know about the sculpture?” Jupe asked Marble Ackbourne-Smith.

As if in answer, Marble opened his large, broad hand. In it there was a large light purple crystal. Then he closed his hand again—this time in a tight fist. “I must go to purge the hostile

vibrations from my crystals."

Marble called it a night, moving his large body in heavy-footed clumps and leaving Jupe and Pete in the large room where the candles were flickering out one by one.

"Excellent work, remembering the sculpture in Diller's house."

"Stick with me, Jupe. I'll teach you all my tricks," Pete said with a grin.

It was almost two a.m. when they left Marble's house. The night's fresh air made them yawn and remember that it was late.

"I need to catch some z's," Pete said after starting his car. "I'll drop you off."

"What are you going to do with Harvey?" asked Jupe, checking the right side-door mirror. "He's waiting in his car to see where we go."

Pete tensed up and checked the rear-view mirror. Harvey's Camaro was parked a few yards down the block in a shadow behind them. The smile left Pete's face. "If that's the way he wants to play, I'll take it slow and easy so he can keep up with us," Pete said. "Then I'll lose him at Carabunga."

"Sounds good to me," said Jupe as he settled back to enjoy the ride.

"Most people have the wrong idea about how to drive when you know you're being followed," Pete explained.

“Mmmm—huh,” Jupe said, his eyes glued to the mirror so he could watch Harvey trailing behind them. “You got to be a super-courteous driver to the bozo who’s following you,” Pete went on. “For example, you don’t want to speed through any yellow lights. What if he doesn’t make the light? He’s lost you and the fun is over. And you don’t want to play leapfrog changing lanes all the time. That makes him blow his cover to keep up with you.”

“Three blocks to Carabunga,” Jupe said.

“Let’s say good night to Harvey,” Pete said. He floored the accelerator and sped the wrong way up a one-way street for one crazy block, grateful that there was no oncoming traffic. Then he made a sharp right turn and bounced his car right up onto the curb. Immediately he shut off the engine and turned out the lights. Then he and Jupe ducked down.

Pete had made a perfect three-point landing in the back row of Carabunga Motors’ used car division. They peeked out the side window just in time to see Harvey circling the block.

“He can’t find us. He’s giving up and driving off,” Jupe said.

“Okay, Harvey,” Pete said with a laugh as he started the motor. “Now it’s our turn to follow you. And you’d better take us someplace interesting.”

10
The Third Eye

IT WAS THE FOURTH TIME THAT NIGHT THAT PETE and Jupe had switched places with Harvey in the game of cat and mouse. And the game was getting harder to play. At well past two in the morning, there were so few cars on the streets that Pete had to stay several blocks back just to keep out of sight.

"This better be worth it," Pete said, yawning.

"You know what I've been thinking, Pete?" Jupe said. "Harvey may be leading us right to where Diller is being held."

Pete sat up straighter and edged a little closer to the Camaro. "You think Marble and Harvey are in with the kidnappers?" he asked.

Jupe's answer was blunt and cold. "They're lying about something."

They were in Bel Air now, one of Los Angeles's most exclusive neighborhoods. Suddenly Harvey pulled over and stopped in front of a three-story pink stucco house with a Mexican clay tile roof. In the moonlight a weeping willow tree cast a large shadow, shaped like a stalking cat, against the house.

Harvey got out of his car, scanning the sleeping neighborhood in every direction. Then he put on

a dark backpack and moved cautiously toward the darkened house. It was clear from his movements that he was worried about tripping a security system.

"Whoever is in the house isn't expecting him or he'd knock on the front door," Pete said.

Once they were out of their car, Pete and Jupe were doubly cautious. They didn't want to trigger the security system, either. And they didn't want to be caught by Harvey.

Harvey walked the front perimeter of the house, checking every window. Pete and Jupe planted themselves behind a fat old tree.

"What's he doing?" whispered Pete.

"He seems to be looking in all the windows," Jupe said. "But I don't think anyone is home. And he's talking into a small tape recorder."

When Harvey was done talking, he pulled out a camera and took photos through the darkened windows. Then he got into his car and slipped away, going directly to Marble's house.

"Back where we started from," Pete said, leaning sleepily on the steering wheel with both hands. "What do we do now, Jupe?" Jupe was sound asleep.

The next afternoon, sitting in Headquarters, Jupe and Pete filled Bob in on the events of the previous night. They covered being pushed into

the grave at the cemetery, following and being followed by Harvey, and finally watching Harvey photograph a dark house.

"Dynamite story, guys. Can't wait for the movie. But what's this got to do with Diller? I thought we were trying to find him," Bob said.

"Okay, we didn't find Diller last night, as I had hoped. But we know that Marble has a powerful hold on Diller," Jupe said.

"And Marble lied," Pete said. "He claimed he had never been to Diller's house, even though he knew about that statue that's in Diller's house."

"Sculpture, not statue," corrected Jupe. "Anyway, you could be right, Bob. We may be pursuing the wrong man. But other than Richard Faber specifically, and all of Hollywood generally, Mr. Ackbourne-Smith is all we've got."

A knock on the trailer door made everyone freeze for a second. Jupe tucked in his T-shirt before answering the door.

"Hi," said a girl. Her long, frizzy blond hair fell wildly over one side of her face, covering one of her green eyes. "Is Bob here?"

"Uh," Jupe said nervously. He actually couldn't remember and had to look behind him. "Come in," he was finally able to say.

"Hey, Morgan," Bob said, giving the girl a

friendly smile.

"Am I early? What is this place?"

"Early?" Bob said. "No, I forgot the time. These are my friends, Jupiter Jones—"

"Great name. Really spacey," said Morgan.

"And Pete Crenshaw," said Bob.

"Hi," Pete said. "What high school?"

"Hollywood High," said Morgan with a smile. She bit her lip when she smiled.

"Morgan's the singer with a group called Jammin' Jelly," Bob said. "I got them booked at a party tonight. So we've got to go."

"Well, thanks for stopping by, Bob," Jupe said.

"Yeah, we were forgetting what you looked like," added Pete.

"Guys, what can I say?" said Bob. "A job's a job." He slipped his arm through Morgan's and led her to the door.

When they were gone, Jupe said, "Did you see her?"

"I was using all three eyes," Pete said.

"Bob gets all the beautiful women without even trying," Jupe said with a sigh. "What am I doing wrong?"

"In a word," said Pete, "everything!"

Jupe glared at Pete for a moment, then sighed

again. “You’re probably right.”

The next day was Saturday, and Pete met Jupe and Bob at the beach. November wasn’t prime swimming time—except for the die-hard surfers who’d hotdog with both legs in a cast if they had to. But it was still great weather for a little touch football and a bonfire cookout. “I’m going ten yards out on a crossing pattern. You hit me with a bullet when I buttonhook,” Pete said, flipping the football to Jupe.

“Why don’t I just throw you the ball?” asked Jupe.

“Sure—whatever makes you happy,” Pete said, rolling his eyes. He took off down the beach, then turned around for the pass. But the ball went sailing five yards behind him. “That was a guaranteed interception,” he told Jupe as he trotted back with the ball.

“You know,” Jupe said absently, “if we don’t find Diller Rourke, they’re going to have to stop production on *The Suffocation II*.”

But Pete wasn’t listening. Instead, using his hands to shield his eyes from the late-afternoon sun, he looked a long way down the beach. “Hey, Jupe. I’m going down there by the cement steps.”

“Are you kidding?” Jupe looked appalled. “I can’t throw that far.”

Pete laughed. “I know. But I think I see Kelly over there with a girlfriend.”

Pete jogged down the beach, slowing when he got to the steps in the side of the dune. Kelly was sitting with one of her cheerleader girlfriends, who stood up and walked away when she saw Pete coming.

At first Kelly looked like she was going to leave too. “Hi,” Pete said, shifting the football from under one arm to the other.

“Hi,” Kelly said.

“How’s it goin’?”

Kelly nodded without saying anything.

“I’ve been thinking about you,” he said, spinning the football in his hands. “I was going to call you, but the last week has been crazy. We’re working on a case. Kidnapping.”

Kelly stared at the football. “Have you challenged the kidnappers to a game of football on the beach?”

“Uh, no. Jupe and I came down to the beach—we’re waiting for Bob. We’re working on this case. I told you.”

Kelly stood up. “I’m working on my own case—the case of the missing boyfriend,” she said. She turned over a rock with her foot. “Nope. Not there. I give up.” They looked at each other for a moment. Pete knew it was his turn to say something. But it had to be good. “Hey, look, babe. I’m not missing. But someone else is.

Really. It's important."

Kelly shrugged and looked hurt. "I wish I were important," she said, and ran to catch up with her girlfriend.

Pete walked back up the beach… alone. He had hoped he'd be walking back with Kelly beside him. But he wasn't. To make matters worse, Bob had arrived and he'd brought Morgan, the fabulous-looking singer. She was dressed for the beach in iridescent pink tights, a long black T-shirt, and high heels.

"First of all, you guys," Bob said, "Morgan was sensational last night. I think we may have made a deal for a record contract."

"There were all kinds of Hollywood types at the party. Real hamburger heads," Morgan said with a giggle.

"Including—are you ready for this?" Bob said. "Marble Ackbourne-Smith!"

"I've read all his books," Morgan said, twisting a curl of her frizzy hair, which didn't need any more twisting. "A metaphysical mini-cube, but for a man his age, he looks great in a bathing suit."

"Yeah, Marble went swimming at the party," Bob added.

"But he can't swim!" Pete exclaimed.

"He said it's one way to open his openness,"

Bob said. “Anyway, six people jumped in the pool to save him. He’s quite a showman. He was really working on one particular woman, a very wealthy widow.” Bob stopped for a minute. “Pretend this is a crystal in my hand,” he said, picking up a smooth white pebble from the beach. He touched the pebble to Morgan’s forehead and then to his. “Mrs. Wembly, we have never met, but I feel that our auras are in tune,” Bob said, imitating Marble’s voice.

Morgan changed to a Southern accent. “Why, ah don’t know what you mean,” she said.

“I see a Chagall painting hanging in your house,” Bob went on. “The old wooden frame has a chip in the lower right corner, probably from being dropped at one time.”

“That’s absolutely true, darlin’! How could you know that?”

Bob touched Morgan’s forehead again with the pebble and closed his eyes. “I see a cute little kitten sleeping in an antique ceramic bowl.”

“It’s uncanny!” Morgan squealed.

“But here’s the clincher,” Bob said to Jupe. He touched Morgan’s forehead again. “And what an unusual willow tree. It seems to cast a shadow like a cat on your house!”

“Willow tree? Cat shadow?” Pete shouted, and stood up. “Harvey!”

“I thought you’d like our little scene,” Bob said as he and Morgan took a dramatic bow.

“So that’s it,” Jupe said. “Harvey was spying on Mrs. Wembley the other night, gathering information for Marble to use at the party.”

“And she was falling for it,” Bob said. “She was ready to write him a large check on the spot if he would agree to be her adviser.”

“It’s quite a clever scam,” Jupe said.

“That’s how Marble could know about Diller’s sculpture but never go to Diller’s beach house,” Pete said. “Harvey probably photographed it.”

“Well, anyway, the guy’s a total phony,” Bob said. “Although I wouldn’t say that to his face. He’s big enough to pin me to the mat like a squashed mosquito.”

“That’s it!” Pete shouted, smacking his forehead again and again. “What a jerk! How could I forget?”

“Forget what?”

“That’s where I know Marble from. He’s Tommy the Two-Ton Titan! Marble Ackbourne-Smith is a wrestler I used to watch on TV when I was a kid! He used to come into the ring carrying these two black metal weights. They each said ‘one ton’ on them. He bragged about being the world’s strongest, meanest wrestler. I knew I’d seen him somewhere before.”

Jupe and Bob burst out laughing. “And here’s the worst part,” Pete went on. “Before he was a wrestler—he was a champion swimmer!” All three of them howled.

“The man’s entire life has been a total fraud,” Jupe said. “From phony wrestling to phony New Age predictions seen with his third eye.”

“Yeah, and we know who his third eye is,” Bob said. “Harvey.”

“Right. But I’m afraid this means that Marble Ackbourne-Smith, alias Tommy the Two-Ton Titan, is not our kidnapper,” Jupe said glumly. “We’ve been on the wrong suspect all along.”

Bob agreed. “He’s just a guy after people’s money.”

“But he sure didn’t want us to find out,” Pete said. “That’s probably why he had Harvey follow us and push us into that grave!”

“Here’s some more bad news,” Bob said. “I made some phone calls and found out that Richard Faber was in Hawaii the day Diller disappeared. So I think he’s out of the picture as a suspect.”

“So where do we go from here?” Pete asked.

Jupe shrugged. “Back to square one.”

It was evening when Jupe, Pete, and Bob returned to the Headquarters trailer with a stack of rented Diller Rourke movies. With no other

leads to follow up on, they hoped that the films might provide a clue.

As Jupe mixed up a protein milk shake in the old blender he had repaired, Pete hit the messages button on the telephone answering machine.

Beep! "Hey, guys," said Pete's father, "I thought you'd want to hear the latest. Marty Morningbaum just got a second ransom note. The kidnappers want some big bucks by ten o'clock tomorrow night—or *they'll kill Diller Rourke!*"

11
Ransom in the Can

THE WORDS ON THE ANSWERING MACHINE FELT LIKE a metal choker collar around Pete's neck. "They want big bucks or they'll kill Diller," his father had said. Pete swallowed hard and looked at Jupe. I shouldn't have tried to solve this myself, he thought. Now maybe we're running out of time.

"Too bad your dad didn't say where the drop is," said Bob.

"Maybe he doesn't know," Pete guessed.

"I agree," Jupe said. "I suspect that only the kidnappers and Morningbaum know exactly where and how much. But we've got to find out."

"How?" Pete asked. "Marty made it clear he doesn't want us working on this case."

"I am fully aware of that," said Jupe, "but he'll feel differently if he drops a lot of money—and doesn't get anything in return."

"You mean if the kidnappers just take the money… and kill Diller anyway?" Bob said.

Jupe nodded. "So we're going to have to persuade Marty to cut us in. To do that, we'll have to hit him where he lives—Espeto's Restaurant."

Bob whistled. "Espeto's!" Pete said. "Jupe, put

your gear-shift in serious. That place is wall to wall movie celebs and Hollywood power players."

"That's why I'm sure we'll find Morningbaum there," said Jupe. "Tomorrow. It's the place for Sunday brunch."

"Yeah, but we can't afford a glass of water in a place like that—and a protein milk shake is probably a couple hundred bucks," Pete said.

Jupe's smile announced that he had already considered that fact and had thought of a plan. "We won't necessarily be eating."

The next day at two, Pete drove Jupe and Bob to Espeto's. Jupe had checked that Marty had a reservation. The restaurant itself was a small redwood building surrounded by unusual Japanese trees and a rock garden. The only difference between it and any other Italian restaurant in L. A. was that every car in Espeto's parking lot cost almost as much as the national debt.

Once they were inside the restaurant, it took a minute to adjust to the darkness. At first they couldn't see a thing. Italian opera played on the sound system and warm garlic wafted through the air.

Then someone cleared his throat in the dark. Pete jumped. It turned out to be the maitre d', a tall, balding man in a perfectly pressed tuxedo.

He was looking at the three teenagers as if something disgusting had walked in. "What, may I ask, are you doing here?" he asked in a calm but poisonous voice.

What's his problem? Pete thought—until he noticed how they were dressed. Bob was wearing his uniform these days—chino pants, oxford shirt, no socks, loafers. Jupe had on a T-shirt that said **WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, THE TOUGH GO OUT TO LUNCH**. And Pete realized he wasn't dressed much better, wearing a T-shirt from the rock group Speed Limit, which he chose because he thought it made him look like Richard Faber.

"We'd like to see Mr. Marty Morningbaum," Jupe said.

"Do you think he'd like to see you?" asked the headwaiter.

"Tell him it's Pete Crenshaw," Pete said.

The maitre d' nodded reluctantly and left. A moment later he returned and led them to Marty Morningbaum's private table. It was near a window facing the Japanese garden. So many portable telephones and fax machines sat on it that there was only room for a small plate of fruit salad. Marty watched the Investigators with his head cocked to one side.

"Hello, Mr. Morningbaum," Pete said.

"I don't like it when I see you in threes," Marty

said, shaking his head.

"Mr. Morningbaum, we understand that you received a second ransom note," Jupiter said. "Could we see it, please?"

Marty's hand moved involuntarily toward his sport coat in the direction of his inside pocket. But just as quickly he pulled his hand away. "I told Pete from the first, kid. Stay out of it. No way am I going to risk someone getting hurt—you guys or Diller. And that's my last word."

One of the portable phones on the table began ringing. Marty grabbed it and started talking as if the Three Investigators didn't exist.

The three friends retreated to the door.

"It's obvious that he has the ransom note," Jupe said.

"Yeah, in his jacket pocket," Pete said. "How are we going to see it?"

Bob was smiling—a sure sign that he either had a plan or he saw a fabulous girl. In this case it was both. A minute later, he hijacked a waitress by blocking her way. She was a gorgeous brunette with three earrings in her left ear.

"How's it going?" Bob asked, switching on the famous Bob Andrews charm to maximum warp. "We don't know each other, but something tells me that if I ask you to do a favor for me—no matter how strange—you're the kind of person

who will do it."

"What producer do you want to meet?" she asked with a funny smile.

Bob shook his head. "I want you to spill something on Marty Morningbaum. And then bring his jacket to us in the kitchen."

The waitress looked from Bob to Jupe to Pete. "Marty Morningbaum? Why don't I just cut my throat?" she said. "What are you going to do? Lift his wallet? His address book? You're crazy."

"I'm not a thief," Bob said, giving the waitress a sincere gaze. "And this isn't a joke. The truth is, it's a matter of life and death."

The waitress stared into Bob's eyes and he gave her his best "you're a beautiful girl" grin. Finally she smiled back. "Oh, why not? If I get fired—who cares? I'm sick of this stupid job anyway," she said. Then she walked away.

Bob, Pete, and Jupe then sneaked into a pantry between the dining room and the kitchen to stay out of sight, waiting, wondering if she'd really do it.

Suddenly they heard glass crashing and three voices all talking at once. The waitress was apologetic. The maitre d' was furious. Marty was calm and forgiving. A moment later she brought the jacket with a large dripping water stain into the kitchen. "Give me a clean towel," she called to a friend.

Jupe took the jacket and reached into the inside pocket. “Bingo,” he said, pulling out the ransom note. He unfolded it. It said: “Come to the telephone booth at Gary’s Gas Station, Van Nuys Ave. Sunday at ten P.M. One million dollars. Come alone or Diller Rourke is a dead man.”

Quickly Bob copied down the note as the waitress frantically blotted up the water on Marty Morningbaum’s jacket. Then Jupe put the note back in the jacket pocket. After thanking the waitress, they rushed back to Pete’s car and Jupe reread the copied note. “Does anyone know where Gary’s Gas Station is?” Jupe asked.

“I know the place,” Pete said. “It’s big and it’s busy. All the attendants wear roller skates. A lot of people come just for the show.”

By eight o’clock that night the Three Investigators were in place across from Gary’s Gas Station. It was brightly lit with fluorescent and neon tubes, and Beach Boys records were blasting out of the speaker system. Pete parked across the street in a medical office parking lot and hoped that his Vega wouldn’t be too obvious when Morningbaum pulled up.

Then the Three Investigators simply waited and watched. From their vantage point they could see the gas pumps, the roller skaters, and two phone booths. One was near the street, the other one closer to the building.

The two hours dragged by, especially since they knew nothing would happen until ten. “Why did we have to come so early?” Pete asked Jupe.

“Shh. Limo coming,” whispered Bob.

It was 9:58 p.m.

They watched a white stretch Mercedes pull slowly into the gas station and stop by an out-of-order air pump. A rear door swung open and Marty Morningbaum stepped out. He was carrying a large, expensive-looking leather suitcase.

A million dollars. It all fit into one suitcase.

“The note said come alone. I wonder why Morningbaum brought his chauffeur?” Jupe said.

“That is alone, in Hollywood!” Bob said.

Marty wrapped his arms around the suitcase and carried it over to the phone booth near the street. It was a tight squeeze inside for him and the suitcase together. The minute he closed the door, at exactly ten p.m., the phone rang.

Morningbaum let the phone ring a couple of times while he swiped at his wet forehead with his palm. He kept looking toward his car.

“What’s he waiting for?” Pete asked.

Finally he picked up the phone. The voice on the other end did all of the talking. Marty just kept nodding to everything he was told. Then he hung up.

Pete started the engine of his Vega and slowly rolled out of the parking lot, following Morningbaum's car. It led them to an elementary school in a quiet suburb not far from Bel Air.

"The kidnapper is probably already here," Jupe said softly as they neared the school. "We've got to be quiet."

Pete killed the engine and the lights before his car came to a stop. Then they got out quietly to follow Marty, who was well ahead of them. They stayed in the shadows and watched as Marty dragged the suitcase noisily along the ground on its wheels. He neared the playground equipment.

The night was very cloudy and dark, with only a little moonlight shining. Pete could hardly see. But what he heard was unmistakable.

It was the sound of Marty Morningbaum pulling the lid off a heavy steel trash can in the middle of the playground. Then the suitcase dropped in. With a loud clatter, Marty replaced the lid. That was the drop. A million dollars in a leather suitcase sitting in a trash can.

No one breathed as Marty walked past their hiding place in the bushes. He was close enough that they could smell his after-shave. "Now we'll see some action," whispered Bob.

"Maybe," Pete said hesitantly.

Waiting was never fun. Especially on a playground. The swings creaked. Was that just

the breeze or was something sitting on them? Twigs and branches snapped. Was that the breeze or was someone stepping on them?

Rattle! Crash! A steel garbage can lid. It wasn't the breeze. Someone was picking up the suitcase!

Pete saw a single dim figure a hundred yards away. Moonlight did not reflect off him. He seemed to be wearing black clothes and a black ski mask.

The three teenagers took off running, running as fast as they could. Instantly the dark-clothed figure ran too.

Pete took the lead, stretching out, making every muscle propel him faster and farther. Then, catlike, instant stop! The footsteps in the darkness in front of him had stopped.

"Spread out!" Pete called to Bob and Jupe in a loud voice. Let's make this guy think there are fifteen of us, not three, he thought to himself.

Somewhere to the left, the footsteps started again. Pete took off running, around the swings, past the seesaws. Running and listening. Then he stopped to listen harder. Silence. Where were Jupe and Bob?

The suitcase must be slowing him down. Or he's getting tired, Pete thought. Or he's gone.

Smack! A dizzying pain caught Pete right in the stomach. Suddenly there was no air. His lungs

gasped, his gut ached. Then Pete fell straight over on his stomach and lay there in a heap—totally unable to breathe.

12
Inside Job

THE NEXT THING PETE KNEW THERE WERE FOOTSTEPS coming toward him in the dirt. He tried to stand up, but someone large was standing over him. It was too dark to see faces—or was he blacking out? A pair of hands yanked him to a sitting position and shook him a little.

"Pete, are you okay?"

It was Jupe. He sounded worried.

"What happened?" Bob asked. Pete shook his head hard.

"I got hit in the stomach," Pete said. "I never even got a chance to karate-chop him! I think I got hit with a million dollars in a suitcase. Whatever it was, it creamed the wind out of me. I couldn't breathe."

"The kidnapper got away. You were running around like a madman and by the time Bob and I caught up with you, he was gone," Jupe said.

"How do you feel?" asked Bob.

"I feel… hungry," Pete said.

"He's back to normal," Bob said to Jupe.

In a little while Pete, Jupe, and Bob were standing in line at the nearest Smarty's Food Restaurant. Pete ordered a double beef 'n' cheese

IQ Burger. Bob ordered an apple fritter. And Jupe criticized the name of the restaurant.

"Do you realize it's ridiculous calling this place Smarty's?" he asked the girl who was trying to take his order. "Food Restaurant? What other kind of restaurant is there? That's not smart—that's redundant."

"Where'd you escape from, Chuck?" the girl asked.

"Jupiter," said Jupe, sharply correcting her.

"That's what I thought," she said. "You want something to eat, Chuck?"

When Jupe finally joined Bob and Pete at a table, he was sipping something in a tall plastic cup.

"That looks suspiciously like a strawberry milk shake," Bob said as Jupe sat down.

"She told me it's their protein milk shake," Jupe said. "They do them differently here."

"I guess putting in a floater of ice cream qualifies as doing them differently." Bob laughed.

Jupe cleared his throat. "Let's talk about something more important," he said. "The kidnapper. The pick-up guy. There was something familiar about him."

"I know this: He swings a mean suitcase," Pete said. "I'm lucky he didn't bust a few ribs."

“Did it feel like the suitcase was swung in a downward or an upward arc?” Jupe asked.

“Who cares? It hurt!” Pete complained.

“All I meant was, is he tall or short?” Pete took a big bite of his burger. The ketchup oozed out, reminding him of blood. “He didn’t seem short when we were chasing him.”

“I agree,” Jupe said.

“That makes three of us,” Bob said. “So now we know that there is something familiar about him and that he’s tall,” Jupe said.

“Well, that eliminates Richard Faber once and for all,” Pete said. “He looks tall in the movies, but I met him and he’s puny. Strong, but puny.”

“Well, then who?” asked Bob. Pete shrugged. Jupe pulled out the copy of the second ransom note again, looking for a clue he might have missed. Suddenly he stopped drinking his strawberry shake and closed his eyes.

“Wait a minute,” Jupe said, his eyes popping open. He suddenly grabbed Pete’s half-eaten burger on its small plastic tray and put it in the middle of the table. Next he put the salt shaker near the burger. He set the pepper farther away, close to the edge of the table. “Look at the ransom note,” Jupe said excitedly, although he didn’t wait long enough for Pete or Bob to read it. “It says to come to the telephone booth at Gary’s Gas Station. Okay, this is Gary’s Gas

Station." He pointed to the burger on the table. "These are the two phone booths," he said, pointing to the salt and pepper shakers. "One was near the building and one was near the street. Follow me?"

"Yeah, but I don't know where you're going," said Pete.

"You will. One more minute," Jupe said. "Now, what happened when Morningbaum arrived?"

"He got out of his car and went into a phone booth," Pete said, pointing to the pepper shaker. "And the phone rang," added Bob.

"Exactly!" said Jupe, picking up the pepper shaker. "We didn't see him think or choose or flip a coin. And the note didn't tell him which phone booth to go into! But he went straight into that particular phone booth—and it rang! How did he know which one the kidnappers would call?"

No one said anything for a minute. Pete was amazed, as usual, by his friend's brilliant brain.

"Maybe it was a lucky guess," suggested Bob.

"A possibility, of course," Jupe agreed. "But the other possibility is that Marty Morningbaum knew to go into that phone booth—because he's somehow involved with the kidnapping!"

Bob stood up.

"Where are you going?" Pete asked. "To make a phone call," Bob said. His two friends looked at

him.

"I'm supposed to meet Morgan in half an hour at an all-night recording studio," Bob explained. "But Jupe has that 'let's go search someone's private office' look on his face. So I figure I'd better reschedule the session."

At one in the morning the Three Investigators drove up to the movie studio in a truck that belonged to Jupe's uncle's junkyard. They stopped a block away from the tall, arched iron studio gates to get organized and get their story straight.

"Cool place. Needs flags," said Morgan, who was sitting next to Bob in the back of the truck. The belt on her black leather pants glowed in the dark.

"Most girls take a guy's word for it when he says he has to break a date," Jupe grumbled.

"I don't settle out of court for anything," Morgan said. "Besides—I knew Bob wouldn't cancel unless he had something cool to do. So I said to myself, why should I miss out?"

"Okay, I'm going to the gate," Pete said. "Everyone get down under the covers."

As soon as Bob, Jupe, and Morgan were hidden under a tarp, Pete drove to the gate and stopped by the guardhouse.

"Pete Crenshaw?" said the surprised guard.

“What are you doing here? It’s one a.m.”

“My dad got one of Marty Morningbaum’s famous midnight calls ordering him to get in here and haul his stuff off the Suffocation set,” Pete said. “But he was too beat, so I’m helping him out.”

“Yeah, I hear they’re closing up shop. But nobody called me about you,” said the guard, staring at Pete.

Play it cool, Pete told himself as he held his breath.

He didn’t say anything. Just waited for the guard to decide.

“Well, since it’s you, okay, go on and get your stuff. Maybe you’ll get some sleep tonight.”

“Thanks,” Pete said, putting the truck in gear. Once he was past the guardhouse, he let out a long breath and wound his way through the studio lot to the small building where Marty Morningbaum had his office. “Morgan, we need you to stand guard for us from the truck,” Bob said, hopping out. “If you hear the security cops coming, lay on the horn.”

“Stay here?” Morgan said. She giggled and shook her head. “No way. I didn’t bring enough gum.”

Jupe glared at Bob again and Morgan saw him.

“Oh, lighten up, fudge-face,” she said, pinching

Jupe on the cheek.

Jupe almost growled.

Meanwhile Pete had found an unlocked window. Five minutes later he was inside, opening the front door for his friends.

"Hurry up," he whispered. "The security guard is on his way through."

Once they were inside Marty Morningbaum's office, Jupe took over. "Okay. We're looking for something to connect Marty to that phone booth or to the kidnappers. It could be written on a scrap of paper or even something that looks like code. Let's get to work."

The three mini-flashlight beams spread out in three different directions. Jupe checked the file cabinets. Bob checked the trash cans. Pete looked through Marty's desk.

And Morgan sang as she walked around opening closets. Suddenly she stopped. "Anyone here have a camera?" she asked. Bob rushed over to her.

"Why? Did you find something?" he said.

"No, I just felt like having my picture taken," she said.

"Sorry, guys," Bob said in a low voice.

"Scripts, contracts, budgets," Jupe said, naming the contents of the file cabinets. "Zip."

"All I'm finding in the trash are phone messages that say 'Let's do lunch,' " Bob said.

Pete looked down at Marty's desk. There was something here to find—Pete had that feeling.

He opened the first drawer of Marty's desk. In the beam of his flashlight he saw a dozen different watches, plus pills, a comb, a toothbrush, gold-plated golf tees, and a photo of Marty, Diller, and Marble Ackbourne-Smith. There was a bull's-eye drawn around Marble.

Pete closed the desk drawer and opened another. It was empty. That was strange. Then he looked at the telephone. It had four phone lines and a row of buttons for special features. Bingo! That was it!

"Hey, Jupe. There's a redial button."

Jupe stopped what he was doing and came over. "I wonder who he called last?" Jupe said.

"Do it," Bob said to Pete. "Push the button."

Pete picked up the receiver. A light lit. He pushed the redial button.

Boop—boop—beep—boop—beep—boop—beep! The phone dialed the last number that had been called from that phone. It began to ring.

"Yeah," said a voice at the other end. "Marty? Is that you?"

Pete's tongue froze. His whole body went numb. He recognized the voice!

“Hello? Who is it?” the voice on the other end said. But Pete couldn’t answer. His mind was swirling. He slammed the phone down on the cradle.

“What’s wrong with you!” said Jupe. “Who was it? Who answered the phone?”

“You aren’t going to believe this,” Pete said, shaking. “I know that voice. It was Diller Rourke!”

13
Jupe Cuts Up

OF COURSE IT WAS DILLER ROURKE—IT HAD TO BE. Pete had seen enough of Diller's movies to recognize that throaty, tough-guy tone of voice anywhere. "Tell me again," Jupe said. "You hit the redial button, the phone rang, and Diller Rourke answered the phone?"

"Right."

Pete, Jupe, and Bob locked eyes. They were all coming to the same conclusion.

"So the last person Marty Morningbaum called from this phone was Diller," Bob said. He thought for a minute, then grabbed the phone and hit the redial button again. He waited. His lips moved as he counted the number of rings to himself. "No answer," he announced finally.

"All right," Jupe said. "Fact number one—Diller Rourke has not been kidnapped at all."

"Or if he has," said Bob, "he's the first kidnap victim to be given phone privileges."

Morgan giggled and then looked apologetically at Jupe. "I think he's funny. So sue me. My stepfather's a lawyer." She sat down on Marty's desk and swung her legs.

"Fact number two," said Pete, sitting down in Marty's executive chair. "Marty knows where

Diller is."

"Unless someone else used this phone to call that number where Diller answered." It was Morgan, popping her gum and offering her own analysis.

"Possible," Jupe said grudgingly. "But not too likely," Pete chimed in. "Diller just now called me Marty on the phone."

"Right," Jupe said to Pete. "I think we can assume Marty has known where Diller is all along."

"So what we're saying is that Marty and Diller probably planned this kidnapping together—everything: the disappearance, messing up his house, the ransom notes," said Bob. "But why?" That big question mark stopped them cold.

"Yeah," said Morgan. "I mean, really, why would Hollywood's hottest hunk and Marty Morningbaum torpedo a movie like *The Suffocation II*? It's going to sell a lot of popcorn."

"Let's keep looking," Jupe said, rifling the desk papers again. "Maybe the answer is here."

All of a sudden the lights snapped on. Everyone froze and turned toward the door. Standing there with one hand on the light switch and one hand on his billy club was a security guard. "Hey! What are y'all doin' in here?" he drawled. He was a young Southerner, tall and

scarecrow thin. His security guard hat was pushed back on his pale forehead and a straw-colored shock of yellow hair poked forward.

Pete looked at Jupe, who looked at Bob, who looked at Pete.

"I said what's going on in here?"

"Pete," said Bob, "it's your turn to explain."

"Huh—uh," Pete said. "I explained the last time. It's Jupe's turn." Pete pointed at Jupe.

The guard had started off nervous but now confusion was setting in. "Now, y'all aren't supposed to be in here, I know that. And I think I'm supposed to call for backup. Or am I supposed to subdue you first?"

Something in the guard's hesitant manner seemed to give Jupe a clue. He quickly assumed his most adult and authoritative voice. "Officer, I'm going to need your name and badge number. The fact is, this has been a test," Jupe said.

"It has?" the young guard said nervously.

"Yes. As you must know, at this security company we periodically test our agents in real situations. We have been waiting in this office for an hour," Jupe lied. As he spoke he was still fingering through the things in Marty Morningbaum's desk drawers.

"An hour and seven minutes," Bob chimed in, trying to look official as he checked his watch. "I

know how you are about accuracy, J.J."

"That is a long time to go undiscovered," Jupe said.

"Are you sure it's been that long?" asked the guard, pulling nervously at his chin.

"You are—going to have a lot of explaining to do at the main office." Jupe took a sheet of paper out of Marty's desk. He waved it at the guard. "This is our report and it's not very favorable to you."

"Wait a minute." The guard's face changed. "Look, you guys, I need this job. I didn't know they were running a drill tonight."

"You're not supposed to know," Jupe said. "You're only supposed to do your job."

"How about another chance?" the guard asked, looking at Morgan. "I just started this job."

"What do you say, guys? Let's give him a break," Morgan said.

With a small nod of his head, Jupe tore up the paper. "We expect better performance from you next time," he said as he led the way out of Marty's office.

"Sure thing," the young man said, calling to them. "From now on, I'm on the case. No one gets in or out of here, believe you me."

Outside, as the four teenagers walked back to the truck, Morgan slipped her arm through

Jupe's. "Pretty swift dancing in there," she told him. It was too dark for her to see him blush.

"As a matter of fact," Jupe stammered, "and I hate to admit this—"

"You hate to admit anything," Bob teased.

"But I'm afraid I got carried away and tore up this letter," Jupe said, showing them the paper he had torn. "After that, I couldn't just leave it in Marty's desk."

"Is it an important letter?" Pete asked.

"I think so, but I'm not sure why," Jupe said. "It's a letter from an insurance company and it's about the insurance policy on the filming of *The Suffocation II*. It says here that the company agrees to pay twenty million dollars to Marty Morningbaum, the sum he has spent so far on the movie. Producers regularly take out insurance policies such as this to protect their investment in case the star dies or becomes unable to continue the film. Since Diller has not been available to complete the picture, the insurance company will have to make good on its policy."

"So that's it," Pete said, although he wasn't sure he understood. "Morningbaum set up this fake kidnapping so he could collect on the insurance?"

Jupe shook his head and bit his lower lip. "It doesn't quite compute," Jupe said. "This way, they only make back their twenty million dollars,

and no movie comes out. But the first Suffocation picture grossed over two hundred million. The insurance money is small potatoes compared to the potential profits if they finish *The Suffocation II*."

"Hey—where is Diller?" asked Morgan.

The Three Investigators looked at each other questioningly. "Let's ask Marty Morningbaum," Jupe suggested.

Bob shook his head. "He won't tell us."

"We won't ask him," Jupe said. "Diller will." Jupe was good at doing voices and impersonations. He changed his voice to sound like Diller Rourke. "Marty, this is Diller. Come quick. I'm in trouble," Jupe said.

"Close, but no cigar," Pete said. "You could fool a lot of people, but not Marty, I don't think. The only thing that will get him to come is Diller's own voice."

"Diller's own voice," Jupe said slowly, and clicked his tongue several times. "I'll bet that can be arranged."

Jupe's idea was a brilliant one, which he pointed out as he explained it to his friends. He reminded Pete and Bob that they had encountered some spliced audio tape on a case in Mexico recently.

"Now we can put that little trick to work

ourselves," said Jupe. He went on to explain that when movies are made, the picture is recorded on film, but the sound is recorded separately on quarter-inch audio tape. Later it is converted to a 35mm reel of audio tape and then synchronized with the film in the editing process.

"So all we have to do is get the sound reels from the dailies and we can edit Diller's voice to say anything we want. Then we'll leave Diller's message on Marty's answering machine."

Pete agreed—it was a brilliant idea. Bob was excited and Jupe was practically floating. So it was too bad that Pete had to burst Jupe's balloon.

"There's only one problem, Jupe. The sound reels are locked in a vault. We're talking major breaking and entering. Safecracking, even. Forget it."

Jupe's face fell.

"But don't worry. We don't need the dailies," Pete went on. "Why don't we use the stack of Diller Rourke videotapes we rented? They're back at Headquarters, remember? We can dub the sound tracks onto audio tape and edit them that way."

Jupe gave Pete one of his rare admiring smiles as the four of them got inside the truck.

The lights at the Three Investigators' headquarters burned all night. Jupe and Pete watched Diller Rourke movies while Bob took

Morgan home. By the time Bob returned, Jupe had recorded several lines of Diller's movie dialogue onto a separate open-reel tape.

"Diller's best movies are adventure films, but they aren't the best for our purposes," Jupe informed Bob. "We got most of these lines from the one comedy Diller made. It's called *Gorilla Teacher*."

"Yeah," Pete chimed in. "Diller works in this science lab with gorillas and as an experiment he substitutes one for a high school dean and no one realizes they made a switch."

Then Jupe started editing the dialogue. Diller telling the gorilla "You're a real smarty" soon became just the word "Smarty." Then, with a grease pencil, Jupe marked where the sound of the s began and ended on the tape. He cut it away with a razor blade. When the tape was spliced back together, they had Diller saying "Marty."

Soon the sentences "I need to think about this" and "Thanks for your help" became Diller saying, "I need your help."

It was seven in the morning on Monday when their tape was finally done. They called the answering machine in Marty Morningbaum's office. "This is Marty," said the machine. "I'm in a hurry, so leave a quick message and I'll talk to you ASAP. Beep!"

Jupe turned on his tape player and held the

phone up to a speaker. Diller's voice came through loud and clear.

"Marty, I need your help. Come as fast as you can!" Diller's voice said.

Jupe hung up the phone quickly.

"Let's get over to the studio fast—and hope that Morningbaum doesn't call his machine from somewhere else," Jupe said. "He should be into work soon, but he won't stick around for long, not after he hears that message. He'll probably call Diller, but I'm betting that Diller won't answer the phone anymore. He can't risk it—not after Pete's call to him last night. So if my plan works, Marty will have to go straight to Diller's hideout—and we'll go along for the ride!"

14
No Loss!

MARTY MORNINGBAUM'S CAR, A GLEAMING, WAXED black Porsche Cabriolet, pulled out of the movie studio lot about noon. He was traveling. He didn't slow down to wave at the guard. He didn't check the traffic before he pulled out. His screeching tires as he stomped on the gas were his only warning to oncoming cars that he was making a left turn, whether anyone liked it or not.

Pete's hands flexed in readiness on the hard plastic of his small Vega's steering wheel. He was parked across the street, watching Morningbaum speed off. "I think he got our message," Pete said.

"More importantly," Jupe said with a smile, "he fell for it."

Pete pulled away from the curb, keeping his car at a safe distance from the Porsche, blending in with the other traffic. They followed Marty north until L.A. and the heavy traffic were far behind them. The landscape became flat farmlands. After a while, Morningbaum turned off the main road, taking narrower and rougher roads that led up into the coastal mountains. Pine trees and redwoods were everywhere. When Morningbaum turned onto a private dirt road, a dead end, Pete

stopped the car and killed the engine. They were three hours from L.A.—and the chase was over.

The Three Investigators waited in their car for five minutes to be sure they could walk up the road unseen. Then they made the hike. There was a log cabin around the bend. A trail of black smoke puffed from the chimney. What were Diller and Marty doing in there? Pete wondered. Had Diller already told Marty that he didn't make that phone call?

"That fire looks good," Pete said, rubbing his hands together. It was cold in the mountains and the Three Investigators were just wearing T-shirts.

"Back door?" Bob asked.

"Let's surprise them at the front," said Jupe.

When they got to the front door, Pete counted off quietly. Then all at once, with a shout, the three teenagers kicked the door open. They leaped into the log cabin, expecting to finally see Diller. But Diller wasn't there.

Instead they found a large, sparsely furnished room. What furniture there was—a dining table, chairs, a couch, a small bookcase—had been cut out of the same logs as the cabin.

In the middle of the cabin's vast living room Marty Morningbaum was jogging on an exercise treadmill. He looked different now, however. The worried look, the tired, defeated eyes, the gray

sickly skin, were all gone. He looked pleased to see the Three Investigators come crashing through his door.

"Boys, boys, boys, what's going on, boys?" Marty said paternally. He pushed a button on his watch and stopped jogging long enough to wipe his face with the towel around his neck.

The Three Investigators ignored the question and spread out, searching the cabin for Diller. But it didn't take long to see that Diller simply wasn't there.

"What are you boys doing here?" asked Marty. He didn't sound at all surprised to see them. "Why, I'd almost think you followed me."

"We've been hiking in the woods," Pete said.

"Looking for snakes," Bob added, staring coldly at Morningbaum.

"How about some doughnuts?" Marty asked cheerfully.

"Doughnuts?" Pete looked at Jupe. "What's going on?

Jupe shrugged, and Marty beamed. He was being friendlier than ever. "Of course, I never touch them myself, all that fat," Marty said. "But something told me that I was going to have guests today. So I brought some from the commissary. And here you are. What a coincidence."

"Whose cabin is this?" asked Jupe.

Marty's watch beeped and he started jogging on the treadmill again. "It's mine," he said, puffing a little. "It's where I come to recharge."

"Are you alone?" Jupe asked.

"Certainly not," Marty said.

Pete held his breath and glanced around.

"No, you're never alone with nature," Marty said. "Fresh air. Trees. Wild animals. They're all around. I can stand them for about thirty-six hours. Then I run back to the city."

He stopped jogging again and stepped off the treadmill. He wiped his face and it was almost as if he had smeared on a large grin with the towel. "Boys, you don't look happy. What's wrong?"

"We know you got a message on your answering machine today," Jupe said. "You thought it was from Diller Rourke asking you for help. That's why you came up here. You knew Diller was here."

"Diller staying here?" Marty laughed triumphantly. "It's a great story, boys, but take a look around. Does it look like anyone's been here in months? Go ahead, look."

He was making it a challenge. But he was right. The floor and all the furniture were dusty. Jupe scratched his head.

"My dad has a dozen spray cans of this stuff in

our basement," Pete said angrily. "You can't fool me with special effects."

"You boys have great imaginations," Marty said, shaking his head. "But you're wrong. I didn't get any messages today. You can listen to my answering machine if you want. No messages. I came up here to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" Pete asked.

"Celebrate Diller's release, of course. Don't look so surprised, boys. Haven't you heard the good news? The ransom was paid and the kidnappers let Diller go—just as I knew they would."

Surprised was putting it mildly.

"When did this happen?" Jupe said.

"A few hours ago. Just before I left L.A.," Marty said. He walked to the pantry area and opened up a box of doughnuts. Then he started taking out glasses. "Have some milk. You've still got a lot of growing to do—growing and learning." He was having a great time.

"Does this mean that now you'll be able to finish *The Suffocation II*?" Jupe asked.

Marty laughed quietly. It was the first flicker of surprise he had shown. "You know, unfortunately, because so much time has gone by, I'm going to have to close down *The Suffocation II*. But what can I do? Diller's very shaken up, as

you can imagine, and now it's too late. The other actors are committed to other movies. Besides, the movie stank. Jon Travis couldn't direct his way out of a paper bag."

"I see," Jupe said slowly. It was light bulb time for Jupe and it showed. "You don't want to finish the film! You realized it was going to be a bomb, so you decided to collect the twenty million dollars instead."

"Collect twenty million bucks?" asked Marty, pouring glasses of milk. "Boys, *The Suffocation II* cost me a bundle."

"But you're going to get it back. The insurance company will have to pay you twenty million for not finishing the movie," Jupe said.

One of the glasses dropped from Marty's hand and shattered on the floor. Broken glass. Crunch, crunch. "You guys know more about the movie business than I thought," he said. "But no use crying over spilled milk. You're right. The insurance is covering my losses on the film. That's what insurance is for. Boys, there's nothing wrong with that."

"There's something wrong with faking a kidnapping long enough to collect the insurance money," Jupe said harshly. "It's called fraud."

Marty stared at them coldly. "Saying it is one thing. Proving it's another. I think you'd better leave now. This conversation is over."

As they drove back to the city Pete turned on the heater, but he still felt cold. Jupe kept checking his watch, saying he wanted to see the five o'clock news. At about ten minutes till five, when they were still a long way from Rocky Beach, Jupe spotted a dilapidated old diner at the side of the road. It was a sorry sight except for one thing: It had a large satellite dish in back.

"Pull in here," Jupe insisted, jumping out of the car before it stopped.

There were no customers in the diner—just a cook standing with a plate of scrambled eggs in one hand and a fork in the other.

"How about watching the news?" Jupe asked.

The man kept scooping eggs into his mouth as he nodded toward the TV. So Jupe quickly flipped it on and found the Five-Alarm News.

"Some actors portray heroes, but today one actor proved that he was a hero," the TV anchorperson said into the camera. "This morning police found young and popular movie actor Diller Rourke wandering the streets in a dazed condition. He told police that he had just been released after eleven days of being held captive. And a little while ago he repeated the story of his ordeal in a press conference. A Five-Alarm News reporter was there…"

Then the videotape rolled, showing Diller, looking tense, sitting behind microphones at a

table in police headquarters. His famous blue eyes were hidden behind sunglasses. Never known for being polite or patient with reporters, Diller was clearly under a lot of strain.

"Did you give a complete description of the kidnappers to the police?" one reporter asked.

"Uh, sure. I said he looked just like you," Diller replied with hostility. "No, Mack. I didn't describe them. I don't know what those jerks looked like. They kept me blindfolded all day, and the room was totally black all night. I never saw anyone."

"Diller, will you and Victoria Jansen get back together now?"

"Will someone throw that jerk out of here?" Diller said. "You know, man, when you're tied up for eleven days, who's dating who just doesn't ring your chimes anymore."

"How many kidnappers were there?"

"I told you. I never saw them."

"Anyone can count the number of voices," Jupiter said, shaking his head. "He's using his acting ability to keep people off-guard."

"Guess what?" Bob said. "It's working."

"Did they hurt you?" a reporter asked.

"No, we all had a picnic." Diller sort of laughed. "You guys are amazing. You want all the gory details, don't you, you vultures? Fine.

They tied me up, they beat me, and I screamed my jerkin' head off. I hope they choke on their ransom money just like I hope you choke on your questions."

Diller answered a few more questions and then walked away from the microphones. The police believed him and the reporters believed him. In fact, everyone watching the news that evening believed him—except the three young detectives sitting in the empty diner. But they couldn't think of a way to prove that Diller and Marty Morningbaum were lying.

After the news, Pete drove his friends home, not saying anything for a long time. Finally he exploded.

"We blew it!" Pete yelled. He slapped the steering wheel, accidentally blowing the horn. "They're going to get away with it. How could I play it so wrong?"

It took Jupe a long time to answer. "I'm not sure we were wrong," Jupe said. "Perhaps just outsmarted. Marty and Diller must have had a telephone signal worked out. In any case, they sure didn't fall for our answering-machine trap, did they? No, we were outsmarted—it's as simple as that."

"You can call it whatever you want," Bob said. "It still doesn't feel good."

When they hit Rocky Beach, Pete dropped off

Bob and Jupe and then drove around for a while, circling Kelly's neighborhood. He couldn't stop thinking about the case. Would it have been different if he had called Jupe in earlier? There was no way to know.

Finally he jumped out of his car, leaving the headlights on. He ran up and knocked on Kelly's door.

Soon the porch light came on and the door opened. Kelly stood there, looking at him through the screen door.

"Hi," he said.

"Hello, stranger. Don't I know you? Are you lost or something?" Kelly said. "This is my house—where I live. Not detective headquarters or the car shop—where you live."

Pete opened the screen door. "Come on out. Let's talk."

"You talk. I'm listening," Kelly said, pouting. But she stepped outside onto the porch and stood close to Pete.

"Hey, I don't want to fight. I'm sorry about what happened, okay?" Pete's hands suddenly felt like they weighed a ton. "Sometimes no matter what I do, it doesn't come out right, but that doesn't mean I don't try."

Kelly looked at him strangely. "What's wrong, Pete? I mean, I've never heard you sound so

pushed out of shape."

Pete dug into his jeans pocket and pulled out the crystal that Marble Ackbourne-Smith had given him. He put it in Kelly's hand.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Something I don't want anymore," Pete said.

"Why not?"

"Because it reminds me of the one case I tried to handle by myself—and I really blew it."

15
The Vampire Returns

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS LATER, PETE WAS STILL FEELING lousy about the Diller Rourke case. And Jupe wasn't much better. He was trying to drown his sorrows—in hot fudge.

Pete watched the spoon travel up and down, back and forth, from the hot fudge sundae to Jupiter Jones's mouth. In the background the jukebox was shaking the walls of the Ice Creamery with fifties rock. "Jupe, that's your second sundae," said Pete.

Jupe's eyes looked up from the tall glass sundae dish, but the spoon didn't stop and his head didn't move.

Suddenly the bells on the front door jingled and Bob came into the Ice Creamery. He quickly pulled up a chair. "Hey, guys," he said. "I've got big news. Sax Sendler got an early-morning call—guess who from?"

Jupe shrugged. "I'm not very good at solving mysteries these days," he said.

"Are you ready for this?" Bob said. "Jon Travis called bright and early. He's giving a welcome-back party for Diller Rourke tomorrow night at his house. He wants Morgan's band."

"That's great for Morgan," Pete said.

“Boys, boys, boys,” Bob said, imitating Marty Morningbaum’s voice in his cabin the day before. “What I’m trying to say is that this might be our chance to get the truth out of Diller.”

“Have we been invited to this party?” Jupe asked.

“Do you think we should let a minor detail like that stop us?” Bob asked with a smile. “Here’s my plan. We wear white shirts, black pants, and black bow ties, and sunglasses—and hope that the catering service Travis hired will bring waiters who are dressed like us. Then we blend into the scenery—and mingle, boys, mingle!”

Pete laughed and Jupe actually stopped eating long enough to smile.

<—? ? ?—>

The party was in full swing by nine p.m. the next night when Jupe, Bob, and Pete arrived at Travis’s Bel Air house. They found the back door and went in through the kitchen to grab some trays of food. No one really noticed them among the other temporary waiters who were rushing in and out carrying trays of hot hors d’oeuvres.

“Okay. Let’s circulate through the crowd until we find Diller,” Pete said.

Jon Travis’s house was a monument to an obsession with gothic horror. The furnishings were heavily carved antiques, upholstered in dark red velvet. The rooms were lit by tall candelabra

and wrought-iron sconces holding tapered candles. A large banner that said **Welcome Back, Diller!** in drippy red paint hung over a casket draped in red roses in the middle of the living room.

Morgan's band was playing outside on the terrace overlooking the pool. The house was filled with Hollywood celebs and movie people eating and dancing in every room.

"There's Morningbaum," Bob said loudly to be heard over the music. "If he spots us, just walk the other way."

"I don't see Diller yet," said Jupe, dodging to avoid another waiter.

Someone suddenly reached over and grabbed some food off Pete's tray. Then he grabbed Pete's sunglasses off his face.

"What's the joke?" Jon Travis asked.

"Uh, hi, Mr. Travis," said Pete. After that, Pete was stuck. He didn't know what to say.

"The detective business wasn't working out so we thought we'd try catering," Bob said, coming to the rescue.

"Well, stay out of the movie business unless you want your heart sliced into little pieces with a scalpel," Travis said.

"What do you mean, Mr. Travis?" asked Jupe.

"I mean, I threw this whole party for Diller, hoping he'd come back and finish *The Suffocation II*. But you know what he said? Ciao. Au revoir. Hasta luego. Shalom. And that's 'kiss off' in any language. The little jerk."

"Do you know where Diller is?" Jupe asked.

"At the bottom of my pool if I get my way," Travis said. "But try my torture chamber. I saw him going in there with Victoria Jansen."

Jon Travis pointed the way down a circular stairway to a dark room where he kept his collection of antique torture devices.

Everything in the room seemed to have chains for stretching, spikes for jabbing, or weights for squashing. There the Investigators found Diller and Victoria sitting side by side on the stretching rack, talking to each other.

"Oh, Dill, here are the three detectives who were looking for you," Victoria said, giving the Investigators a friendly smile.

Diller's expression wasn't so friendly as he looked the trio over. "Hi," he mumbled.

"That kidnapping must have been rough," Bob said.

"Yeah," Diller said calmly. "You've really got to be into your openness to cope. You're the guys who've been harassing Marble, huh?"

"Harassing?" Pete said. "Hey, I used to be a big

fan of his Saturday afternoon wrestling show."

"We'd like to ask you a couple of questions, since the kidnappers are still at large," Jupe said. "At the press conference you said you couldn't tell how many kidnappers there were. Did you ever count the voices you heard?"

Diller shook his head. "They kept changing their voices," he said. "Just to play with my head, you know." His eyes didn't blink. He was totally cool.

"Would you imitate one of their voices?" Jupe asked.

"Hey, look, chubby…" Diller said, hopping down from the medieval torture device. But Victoria put her hand on his shoulder. "They're trying to help, Dill," she said.

"It should be easy for you, since you're an actor," Jupe said, emphasizing the last word. "Could you say, 'Hello, Marty? Is that you, Marty?' as one of the kidnappers. And then say it again as yourself. I believe it would be very useful."

"Go ahead, Dill. Help them," Victoria said.

Diller said the words. He said them twice, once in a strange voice and once in his own. Pete shivered. Diller's voice was exactly the same as the one he'd heard when he hit the redial button in Morningbaum's office. Pete nodded at Jupe, who nodded back.

“We saw the photo of you tied up,” Jupiter said. “Did they keep you tied most of the time?”

Diller was wearing a loose-fitting short-sleeved turquoise shirt. He looked down at his wrists, which were not bruised, and then looked carefully at Jupe. “No, not tied up. Just locked up.”

He dodged that one. He’s good, Pete thought.

“What was all the glass?” Pete asked.

“What glass?” Diller asked.

“All the glass in your beach house,” Pete said. “It was everywhere I looked.”

Suddenly all the lights in the house flashed off and on, off and on.

“Hey, everyone into the screening room,” Jon Travis announced over a P.A. system. “I’ve got a surprise.”

“Let’s go,” Diller said to Victoria. “These guys are giving me bad vibes.”

“But what about the glass?” Pete asked.

“Hey, man, they grabbed me and threw some kind of bag over my head,” Diller said, pushing past the three teenagers. “For all I know, they painted the place red. I haven’t been back. You guys better learn to relax.” He led Victoria up the circular staircase out of the torture chamber.

“I believe we succeeded in making him

nervous," Jupe said when they had gone. Pete looked around at all the torture devices. "Who wouldn't be nervous down here?"

"We don't need him to be nervous," Bob said. "We need him to make a mistake. But he's too cool. He's going to get away with it."

By the time they got upstairs Jon Travis was standing in front of a large movie screen in his screening room.

"Well, we're all here for the same reason: to tell Diller how glad we are that he's safe and sound," Jon said. "The world will never know how close it came to losing one of its best unshaven stars." Everyone laughed. "And I just want to say that I've loved working with him and I hope next time we can actually finish the picture."

More laughter, although some of the people sort of coughed and looked at each other. "What about the surprise?" someone yelled.

"The surprise," Jon said with a smile, rubbing his hands together. "The surprise is a secret. We all have secrets we'd like to bury—and Diller has one, too."

Pete watched Diller's face closely, but it was blank.

"This isn't the first time Diller's worked on one of my pictures," Jon went on. "As a matter of fact, his first movie was also my first movie."

"Oh, no! Not *Vampire in My Closet*," Diller cried out, hiding his face in mock embarrassment. "That bomb was so terrible the studio never released it. I stank in it."

"You certainly did—but so did I. Back then I don't think people would have looked at me and said I had the makings of a brilliant director," Jon said. Travis paused as though he was waiting for applause. "Ladies and gentlemen and friends, Diller doesn't know this, but I have the only existing print of my first movie, *Vampire in My Closet*, starring Diller Rourke. And it's my pleasure to share this gem right now."

The audience howled and applauded.

"Lights! Camera! Action!" Jon called.

The lights went out and spooky music began as the film rolled.

It was an awful movie. Teenagers at a boarding school were attacked by vampires whose crypts had accidentally been opened by the vibrations of kids disco dancing.

Diller was one of the first to be bitten, so that soon he returned to the screen not as a student but as a vampire. He swept onto the screen in a black cape. His pale face had a fluorescent greenish cast, and the black makeup around his eyes made his cheeks look sunken.

Pete suddenly poked Bob and Jupe so hard that Jupe cried "Ouch!"

“Do you see what I see?” Pete said in a whisper.

“Remember that?”

Jupe’s smile glowed in the dark. “I remember it perfectly. Diller Rourke was wearing that exact same costume on Halloween—the night he vandalized our headquarters!”

16
The Last Gasp

FOR A MOMENT, A LONG, STARING-IN-SILENCE moment, the Three Investigators didn't move. They couldn't. Their eyes were fixed on the movie screen where Diller Rourke, dressed as a glow-in-the-dark vampire, made his bloodthirsty leaps at people.

"I said we needed him to make a mistake," Bob whispered excitedly. "Way to go, Diller!"

"Now we can prove where Diller was on Halloween," said Pete. "Breaking into our headquarters in that vampire costume. Not being held by kidnappers."

Jupe was excited, too, but more cautious. "We've got a videotape of someone breaking into our headquarters. But the trouble is—we can't really prove that it's Diller," he said. "But if we hurry, maybe we can use the tape to squeeze a confession out of someone."

"I think I'm in love with this plan already," Pete said.

"Good," Jupe said, "because you play a major role in it."

Pete's major role turned out to be driving all the way to Headquarters to grab the videotape and then driving like a maniac back to the party.

The trick was to get back before the movie was over.

Pete's heart was racing as he quickly put his little Vega through its paces on the way to Rocky Beach. The brakes were pulsating and the accelerator seemed to have a dead spot about halfway down. Why did his car's defects always surface just when he needed it to perform like a champ? That's okay, he told himself. It kept his mind off the ticking clock.

He sprang out of the car as soon as he reached Headquarters and ran in to look through the video-tapes. October 29. October 30. October 31! Of course it was exactly where Jupe had filed it. Pete tossed it in the air and caught it for good luck, then hopped in his car and headed back to Bel Air.

The crowd in the spooky gothic house was still watching—and laughing at—*Vampire in My Closet* when Pete returned. He quietly slipped into the projection booth in back of the screening room. Luckily the room was empty. Pete loaded the videotape into a player. Then, with a push of a few buttons, the film projector slowed and stopped. Instantly the video projector took over and the tape of Diller breaking in to headquarters appeared on the screen.

Pete ran to join Jupe and Bob. The audience was laughing louder than ever. "Great editing, Travis," a young actor called out. "Where was

this shot, anyway?"

"What were you doing, Travis? Focusing the camera with your eyes closed?" someone else joked.

At that exact moment Diller kicked in the door to Headquarters on the tape. "Diller, haven't you ever heard of knocking?" a woman said.

She had said the magic word—"Diller." Now Pete, Jupe, and Bob knew they were almost home.

"Hey—that's not me, man," Diller said, sounding nervous.

All the lights in the screening room snapped on. Jon Travis turned and stared at Diller with cold, killer eyes. "When did you do those scenes?" Jon asked.

Diller's fingers clutched a blue crystal. "I'm telling you, man, that's not me," he said.

"Not you? Of course it's you. It's not Rex the Wonder Horse!" Jon said.

"It's not me," Diller said, weakly this time.

"But Diller," Victoria Jansen said softly, "who else could it be? You know you kept that costume after you finished that movie. Why are you denying it?"

Marble Ackbourne-Smith, who was one of the party guests, stood up and spread his arms wide, as if to silence the already silent crowd.

“Sometimes we appear to be the people we are not, even when we are being the people we are,” he said.

“Nice try, Marble,” Pete called from the back of the room. “But you’re still Tommy the Two-Ton Titan or I’ll eat my car.”

Marble sat down again quickly, and Diller fidgeted in his seat.

“Somebody better start explaining what’s going on,” Jon Travis said.

Pete, Jupe, and Bob walked quickly, triumphantly, to the front of the room.

“Mr. Travis,” Jupe began, “that tape you just saw belongs to us. And it was taped on Halloween, exactly nine days ago—the night Diller Rourke vandalized our headquarters in Rocky Beach.”

There was a small gasp from the crowd, then laughter mixed with mumblings of disbelief. “That’s not possible,” said Victoria Jansen. “Diller was kidnapped three days before Halloween.”

“There never was a kidnapping,” Jupe announced. “His disappearance was a hoax.”

Suddenly Marty Morningbaum’s watch beeped and Marty stood up. “I can’t sit here listening to three boys with overstimulated imaginations. They’re obviously on drugs. Diller was

kidnapped, we all know that. Get rid of them, Travis." He started to push his way up the aisle. But Pete blocked his path.

"Please stay, Mr. Morningbaum," Jupe said. "Your name will be mentioned frequently."

"What's that mean?" asked Jon Travis.

"Ask Diller Rourke," said Pete. Diller stood up as if he too wanted to leave. But everyone was looking at him—and he had to perform. He looked at Marty, then at Jupe, Pete, and Bob. Pete thought he looked for all the world like a cornered animal.

Finally Diller sat back down, perching on the top of his movie theater chair. "Yeah, okay, I was never kidnapped, okay? It was just a joke."

"A joke? You call sabotaging my film a joke!" Jon shouted angrily. "How could you do that to me?"

Marty Morningbaum sat down disgustedly. "I know. It probably would have been easier just to kill you, Jon. That way we'd be sure you'd never make another movie again."

"Grow up and face the facts, man. *Suffocation II* was going to be a total bomb," Diller said. "The best parts of that movie were awful. I guess you just couldn't handle the big leagues, Jon."

"Says who?" shouted Travis.

"I do, for one," Marty Morningbaum said.

Diller laughed ironically and looked into his blue crystal. “I’ll tell you what went down, so you can all get a laugh,” he said to the crowd. “A couple weeks ago Marty and I were looking at some dailies. And he was just getting sicker and sicker. Finally he told me he had lost a bundle on the movie already, and if he finished it he’d lose twenty million more. Hey—it was going to be *Vampire in My Closet* all over again. I knew if this movie got released, my career would go down the tubes faster than bacon grease. So when Marty laid out a plan to me, I said go for it. No hard feelings, Travis.”

“No hard feelings,” Jon agreed. “As long as you and Marty go to jail.”

“Jail?” Diller walked to the front and stood by the screen. “Hey, no way. Maybe we were playing a little dirty, okay? But that’s just because it was this great double part. I got to be the victim and the kidnapper. So I really started getting into the kidnapper’s head. You know, like tearing my house apart. It looked like a hurricane, didn’t it?”

“The glass,” Pete interrupted, suddenly feeling like he couldn’t breathe again. “What was all the broken glass?”

“An inspiration,” Diller said. “See, like I needed my crystals with me. But I keep them in a glass display case at home. I knew if the police came, they would wonder what was in the case

and why it was gone. It would be suspicious, man, if the kidnappers let me take the crystals along."

"So to make the whole scene look even more violent you smashed the display case," Jupe said. "Hence, broken glass covering the floors."

"Yeah," Diller said. "This kidnapper was one bad dude. Like, when I was on the playground to pick up the ransom money, for a second I just went wild. You guys were chasing me and I smacked someone with the suitcase as hard as I could. It was unbelievable how this guy took over."

"Yeah, unbelievable," Pete said, remembering how it felt to have the air knocked out of him.

"On Halloween night we had only been on the case a few hours," Jupe said. "Why did you tear up our headquarters?"

"Marty told me about you guys," Diller said, "and the kidnapper inside me went nuts. I figured he'd want to scare you off the trail fast."

"I told you not to do it," Marty blurted out. "I told you it was risky. But no. You always have to overact."

"Hey, look. What's the crime?" Diller said. "So one movie didn't get made. No big thing—America won't miss it. And as for taking a week off, I saved my career and got a million bucks."

"You got to keep the ransom money?" Pete asked.

"Yeah," said Diller. "It's half the money the insurance company paid Marty. I guess I'll have to give it back now, huh?"

Pete nodded. "Yeah, but you got burned, slick," he said. "Marty's check from the insurance company read twenty million dollars."

Diller's head jerked toward Marty.

"Ha!" said Jon Travis. "That's what you get for believing a producer. They'll always try to underpay you. All actors are children."

"And all directors are egomaniacs," Diller said bitterly.

The room was quiet until someone suddenly got up to leave. "Victoria, where are you going?" Diller called out.

Victoria Jansen was almost out the door, but she turned back to Diller. "I don't want to stay for the end of the story. I know how it turns out," she said sadly. "The police come and take away the criminals. It wasn't your best role, Diller. I wish you had stuck to playing heroes."

After she left, the party broke up quickly. Marty Morningbaum kept promising a complete explanation but no one stayed to listen to it.

"The police will listen, Mr. Morningbaum," Jupiter said, looking at his watch. "I called them

a few minutes ago."

It took most of the night to get all of the stories down on paper at the precinct. When the Three Investigators left, the sun was coming up. It was time to go back to Rocky Beach and their normal lives. They went to school a few hours later. Then Pete and Bob worked after school. And Jupe filed the paperwork on their case and tinkered with a new electronics project.

Usually the trio talked a lot about the most recently solved case. But not this time. They had solved it and they had won—but it was the one that almost got away. It felt unfinished somehow.